2006

Zephyrus

Western Kentucky University

100 A CENTURY OF SPIRIT
1906~2006
WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY

Centennial Edition

A Student Literary Publication of
Western Kentucky University

Zephyrus

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This special edition of Zephyrus is dedicated to the memory of

Willson E. Wood
1907-2006

Chair of the Department of English
1959-1972

Centennial Edition Notes

As Western Kentucky University celebrates its 100th anniversary, *Zephyrus* celebrates its 50th. Begun by a student group known as Western Writers, the publication was originally called *Voices* and was published at the group's own expense. The first issue was a mimeographed "Whitman Edition," which circulated only among the group; their first public issue appeared in the spring of 1956. The fact that financial support for *Voices* was later assumed by the Department of English is clear testimony to the value of the undertaking. Further testimony can be seen in the continued support of individual awards by various groups, both on and off campus.

The publication has occasionally faced the typical challenges of a university literary publication--maintaining funding, shifting student interests--and has undergone transformations of format, including the development of an internet version. Nevertheless, it survives--and thrives--on the dedication of the student writers of Western Kentucky University.

In tribute to the talented and enthusiastic Western Writers--both those who used that name and those who have carried on their legacy--the Centennial Edition of *Zephyrus* is presented in two parts. The first is the 2006 *Zephyrus*, arranged as a traditional (though expanded) issue. The second is a retrospective, arranged chronologically, which includes work from every year *Voices* or *Zephyrus* was published.

Special thanks are owed to the creative writing faculty who assisted in selecting pieces for the retrospective portion--Wes Berry, Tom Hunley, Mary Ellen Miller, Jane Olmsted, and Dale Rigby--to the English Department for its unwavering support, to the groups and individuals who have long supported the student awards, and to the Provost's Initiatives for Excellence for making this expanded edition possible.

Award Winners

Jim Wayne Miller Poetry Award
T. Eugene Morris
"The Color of Coal"

Geoffrey McCelvey Memorial Award
Jessica Bates
"Me, In the Image of My Mother"

Browning Literary Club Poetry Award
Lacy Patterson
"Reflection"

Ladies Literary Club Fiction Award
Corey Alderdice
"Secret Identities"

Wanda Gatlin Essay Award
Leigh Krampe
"Hiroshima in June"

Zephyrus Art Award
Ben Davis
Untitled

Writing award recipients are chosen by the Creative Writing faculty of WKU; the art award is chosen by *Zephyrus* staff.

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Part I: 2006

Nancy Heathman **untitled**

Apocalyptic Love Song
Kimberly J. Reynolds

Let us linger in softer placed
Bathed in yellow light
Let the poets ghostwrite
In darkened spaces
Where nothing grows
Except the hollows
Of their eyes
Widening and swallowing
The last passages of light.
Let us dance on eggshell feet
Past the looming lions
In the street
Among the painted trees
Let the worms masticate
And back in love's retreat.
But let us meet
In sidelong glances
Because the fates
Give us few chances
To be the lion,
The mouse,
The smile
On the lips of gods
Where even the faintest crack
Shines white
Instead of black.

Star Stuff
Jay Sizemore

She walks to the church Sunday. Sometimes
she takes the long way, losing herself in her thoughts
and the *click-clock, click-clock* rhythm of her heels
on the sidewalk. Sometimes she brings her Bible,
sometimes she leaves it at home. It doesn't really
matter. She goes to go. She likes to wear her
favorite black dress, the one with the little red flowers
along the hem that remind her of her grandma's rose bushes.
Once, when she was five, and the sky was still bright,
she fell into those bushes, and it took Gran an hour to get
the thorns out. Twenty years later, and she still
remembers her smell: mothballs and mint chewing gum.

She likes to sit in the third pew next to her favorite
window scene, the one of Jesus on the cross, but she's
not always early enough to get that seat. Often, an elderly
man sits beside her. He wheezes quietly as he breathes
and occasionally grinds his false teeth, all the while muttering
indecipherable prayers to himself that maybe only
God can understand. Sometimes it's a young married couple
that joins her, their faces aglow with new devotion and love.
It doesn't really matter. The pews fill with the faithful,
each one different and unique DNA strand, but she knows
that they are all the same. She can read their minds:
Forgive me, forgive me, forgive me. Forgive me for

masturbating and thinking of my best friend's girl,
forgive me for saying goddamn ten times, forgive me
for taking that Snickers bar, forgive me for doing 90
in a 55. Forgive me for wishing my father was dead. She
didn't ask for forgiveness. She doesn't even know if she
believes in God. It doesn't really matter. There's a special
kind of solitude that can only be found in a church. Every one

sits alone. During the sermon, she often finds herself staring
out the stained glass, the red hue catching the trees on fire, and
the blue sterilizing the world. She thinks about Carl. Carl Sagan
died of cancer. He did not believe in God. He said that all existing
matter originates in the remnants of the formation of the stars.

He said we are all "star stuff." Even on his deathbed, he did not
turn to God, as so many often do. She thinks this to be the most
beautiful example of faith she has ever known. Even Jesus,
hanging bloody from nails in his hands, supposedly dying for
everyone's sins, lifted his head and screamed to the heavens,
"Father, why hast thou forsaken me?!" She wanted to name her
son Carl, but she never had a son. She knows what he said id
true because sometimes she feels like she is burning alive,
covered in sweat, intense heat permeating from just beneath
her skin, threatening to turn her to ash in a flare of spontaneous
combustion. It can only be the remnants of a star. She wishes
it would take her completely, burn her out of the fabric

of existence like the way a careless cigarette can leave a hole
in a pillow case. No more sleepless nights fighting the ghosts
in the bed sheets, no more empty picture frames, no more
unworn wedding rings, no more unsung lullabies, not more
suicides, no more, no more, no more. she wants to explode,
erupt into a new sun that shines like a dragon's eye, forms planets
through its gravitational pull and sustains new life. She wants
to be new. She wants to live without fear, without emotion,
without emptiness in the vacuum of space, where nothing
ever breathes, no God exists to comfort the weak, and no one
can hear her when she wakes up and screams: Forgive me,
forgive me, forgive me. Please, Carl, forgive me.

Andrew Clary **Heartstrings**

Cutting Cords

Corey Alderdice

From a purely technical perspective, a telephone conversation is the product of impulses beamed from one side of the world to the other. It isn't a problem the older brother is in his Kentucky home and the younger brother is at a truck stop somewhere in England. Distance doesn't matter, at least from a technical standpoint. From a less than technical standpoint, the younger brother would rather deny his impulse to speak with the older on this important day.

The younger would rather strangle his twin brother than say I love you, but impulses can be deceiving. So he begins the dialing process. It's hard to get away from your twin because, well, you're a twin. Two souls connected since birth with a cord of flesh sharing the same space, living the same life. You dress the same, sleep in the same room, eat the same meals, share the same friends, classmates, birthdays. You're the only person who views yourself as an individual.

Eventually you have to start making your own decisions, becoming an individual. The older brother falls in love and decides to get married. The younger brother goes to England to escape his closed-in little world. The older brother announces one-month earlier that he'll be getting married while the younger is abroad. Each is a decision made of impulses that have brought the twins to this telephone conversation.

It goes without saying the twins had a stressed relationship. Fraternal twins, as these were, only had a tendency to share confined spaces such as full-sized beds and wombs. That was not the concern on this autumn afternoon/morning (depending on which side of the world you were on). The twins had all the space the wanted/needed.

"I love you and I, uh, I'm really proud of you," the younger brother claims. Conversations like this one came rarely during the twins' formative years. They didn't know how to relate in times like this.

"Thanks. I'm sorry you couldn't be here," glosses the older brother. If he was truly sorry, he wouldn't have scheduled his wedding for today, but you have to make your own decisions. "Where are you?"

"I don't have a clue. A gas station would be my best guess." It would've been better to ask *how are you*.

Like their connection, this conversation had become forced. While the doctor may have cut the cord that connected the twins, their mother always found a way to keep them together. At K-Mart, she'd

place a Velcro band around each of their wrists connected with a piece of telephone cord. Each brother would pull in the other direction as hard as he could, trying to gain his emancipation. (It would have been much easier to simply remove the Velcro.) But you don't realize that when you're four.

When you're twenty, well, that's different. They were connected by phone cords then. They were connected by phone cords now, but the impulse that would pull them back together no matter how hard they ran in the other direction then was relatively the same impulse now.

After all, twins are one flesh. For the older brother, he is about to become part of another flesh so he doesn't need the younger. *For this reason a man will leave his father and mother (here, brother) and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.* And this is why the younger doesn't want to let go: he needs his twin.

When you look at it from a purely technical perspective, the harder one object pulls, the harder it comes back...simple science. It isn't simple to say what you really want, but the younger brother doesn't have much time left in this conversation. He has to catch the last leg of his connection back to a temporary home.

Then, an impulse. Finally, after wanting to give in but refusing to for weeks now, the younger brother lets go, "I, uh, I want you to do me a favor, okay?"

"Sure," replies the older, a sense of confusion in his tone.

"I want you to put a photo of me in your pocket today, all right? I just want to be able to be up there with you. You'll do that?"

"Um, yeah. Yeah, I'll do that."

"But don't tell anyone. Look, I gotta go. I love you."

"I love you, too."

The impulse to hang up the phone doesn't arrive. The younger brother just stands at the pay phone for the longest time, alone.

Olfactory

Kandace Robinson

My dad has a smell. After work, after a shower, even in the morning, he smells like work. Motor oil and gasoline infuses every shirt he has ever owned. Even after he retired and the plaid button downs replaced the grey work shirts that had "Bud" embroidered on a small patch above the left breast pocket, the scent stuck around.

My dad was an auto mechanic specializing in various areas for years and was even owner and founder of Bud Robinson's Body Shop for several years. He did body work and painting, worked on semi-trucks and personal vehicles, and, in his spare time, he built race cars for his children to take the checkered flag with or, more often than not, bang up into heaps of scrap iron. I guess the smell absorbed into his skin, because on hot summer days in the backyard it would seep from his pores while he threw horseshoes with this brother and spun yarns about their childhood in Paradise before the coal company moved in.

I learned when I was young to not ever tell him he smells. "You'd smell too," would be my reminder that he put the food in my belly and the clothes on my back. Guilt would set in as I looked at the rough hands with fat little fingers tired from work that used to skim across the page of *The Pokey Little Puppy* while I curled up in his greased stained lap—Johnson & Johnson's and sweat.

Dad worked a lot when I was little. My mom stayed home with my brothers and sister and me until I started kindergarten, so every bit of overtime he could get, he took. He would be gone an hour before I woke in the mornings and wouldn't be back until well after dark. While I sang about sunny days and counted along—"one cookie, ah ah ah, two cookies, ah ah ah"—he was listening to the song of air ratchets and the pop and whistle of mig welders. And even though he wasn't there when I would stub a toe or bang my head and hold my breath until I passed out, as I frequently did, I can remember my first conscious breaths would be full of the acrid smell of work and sweat.

As I got older, I hated the smell. It was everywhere. It hung in the air like the smoke from Mom's Dorals. As a teenager, I was embarrassed to have friends over, afraid they may get a hint of the smell and look down on my working class father or me. My friends couldn't even spell carburetor, let alone know what stench comes from cleaning one. Their dads were doctors and pharmacists. The only smell that was remotely scandalous was the aroma of bourbon or vodka. Besides,

smells are very important to teenagers, when their awkward bodies begin taking on new scents of their own.

The bedroom where he and my mother sleep smells like a garage—all sweat and grease and rusting car parts. I always wondered how my mom could stand it. When I finally asked her, she said, "I always know he's here, even when he's not." At the time, it didn't make any sense to me.

Then I bought a house of my own. It was my little kingdom to preside over. I didn't notice it while we were moving in the quickly disintegrating cardboard boxes. After a week, when my life was taken out of the cellophane and tissue paper and tucked neatly in place, I noticed. There was no smell. My house didn't smell like a home. It smelled like a doctor's office—sterile and empty. When you walked in, you wouldn't know that somebody had worked hard and for years to get there. It makes me wish I had a smell of my own—fresh-from-the-dryer blankets and dinner in the oven, maybe. Just something to let me know I am home and I earned it.

Reflection

Lacy Patterson

There are women, with breasts crammed into sweaters,
applying sample concealers at the
Bath and Body Works today. Imagine
the overwhelming scent of Patchouli. Their pelvises
are cut like a teenage boy's and their hips
never developed past the age of 12. Two have belly piercings.
One can't wait to get home and bleach the hair on her
arms. Yes, Just like you.

Of particular interest is the girl at her desk
in her Critical Theory class in Modesta, drifting
deeper into the lyrics of "Elanor Rigby" that was blasting
out of the speakers of her Dolby Hi-Fi earlier
this afternoon.

She whispers *demarcation*, unsure of the exact definition
but knowing it had something to do with the way she felt.
She has never looked it up or used a
thesaurus. In general, she finds Cosmopolitans exotic and thinks
preparing waldorf salad is paramount to becoming a "woman."
Together with her temporary love, the professor, she is trying to
decipher
the works of Joyce, the mental equivalent of sending an anorexic
cheerleader into the Little Debbie aisle of Wal-Mart.

What she likes about the word demarcation
besides the visualizations of collecting rice with all the other lonely people
is her feeling that it actually makes her something—
something more than television static in a green cardigan.
Maybe she could try one of those busty sweaters.
If being a woman meant silver sticks of L'Oreal Nude Beige
concealer and flipping your crimped, golden bangs to the side

like Naomi Watts, and sipping Luzianne on a white whicker chair
in South Dakota, then it's acceptable to buy an extra small
cardigan from Abercrombie and Fitch to resurrect the allure
of the girls staring back at you from *Jane* magazine.

And even as she pictures herself among headshots
of Heidi Klum and Rosario Dawson,
she is hunching over the podium explaining how
Finnegan's Wake is more than a pun on rivers, noting
Giambattista's theory of cyclical history in particular,
which will make her this year's literati extraordinaire. And for a moment,
she can see this article printed in the Features section of *Vogue*,
both the brains and the beauty, with her beloved
Dr. Roberts hanging from her arm.

Demarcation, she erupts, fists clenching. *Demarcation*,
her throat squeezes, grabbing the doctor
by his vest. *Demarcation*, he repeats into her neck,
moved to eroticism by this erotic display,
digging his fingers into the fleshy part of her thigh,
knowing he just made her feel like Sarah Jessica Parker.

Then, briefly, catching a glimpse of her reflection
in the polypropylene windows, she realizes
that she is, in fact, nothing. Her passion is as
fabricated as the Hydrience Golden Wheat dye in her hair,
the green Hollister sweater hugging her bosom, her desire for
a diploma, and her need for waldorf salad. The girl in the window glares,
and the emptiness swells up inside her, like a flock
of seagulls rising and taking off from the beach like a militia.

There was no flame burning the wick. Her butterflies were long
dead, leaving only rotting, gray cocoons in her belly. Her soul was as empty
as a six-lane highway at 3 in the morning. She needed New York,
she needed rock climbing, she needed she.

The Browning Literary Club Poetry Award was first presented in 1979. It is sponsored by a local organization and is represented in the retrospective by C. W. Mayes (1984), Doug Logsdon (1986), Martha Zettlemoyer (1987), Jennifer Robinson Perillo (1988), David P. Goguen (1989), LaNita Kirby (1990), Holly Hedden (1991), Susan Maertz (1992), Meghan Leigh Hobbs (1995), Kim Kremer (1997), Christa Osborne (1999), Michelle Smith (2000), Danielle Mitchell (2001), and Laura Phy (2003).

Missing
Tina Barnt

the days after
you were found
were quiet

no one spoke
no one cried

it was
hard
to breathe

it was that way
until we
buried you

The Fog
Amanda Schneider

Nantucket was white dunes surrounded by lush green foliage and climbing roses; a place I still mentally visit when in need of peace. For a sixteen-year-old city girl who had never been to the beach, the fact that things could grow amidst the sand was truly astounding. A season of firsts: I ate clam chowder and scavenged for sand dollars. I pool-hopped and skinny-dipped, and I funneled my first beer. I passed the mornings playing Frisbee and the afternoons napping in a fishnet hammock that swayed time to the lapping waves. In fact, naps seemed to be a part of the Nantucket way, perhaps to better prepare for the nightly beach parties and bonfires that illuminated the shoreline like washed up jellyfish.

After one morning of sunrise on the summit and a cross-island walk, a friend and I spread out our towels for a sun bath nap on the cool sand. I drifted in and out of sleep, listening to fragmented conversations over wind and wave. Tom hummed bits of songs, a faint medley soundtrack to my progression toward sleep. The sun zenithed and my freckles deepened. I awoke with that deep breath of the well-rested and opened my eyes to a dense whiteness. I had disappeared along with my friend, the dunes, the sky, and the ocean. I closed my eyes to rationalize; I knew it must be fog, but I never knew that fog could just creep up and absorb the world. All objects, colors and motion were gone to the ghost. It became hard to breathe. To avoid a panicking, I positioned myself toward the orienting sound of the surf. I crawled along like I was taught to do in a house full of smoke, stopping with relief when my hands hit water. I sat there motionless until I could make out the horizon. My friend came back shortly with sandwiches, laughing at my nervous expression, but I was not laughing.

Five years later, and it's three in the morning. I'm sitting on the sink with the shower running, recuperating from a hectic evening. My boyfriend of three years came home and immediately flopped down on the hand-me-down couch. After failed attempts at proposing some action (movies, sex, roller skating) I began to pace. His socks were on the table and his Hot Pocket wrapper littered the floor. He'd begun snoring before he said hello. Wait, he hadn't even said hello. I picked up a little before I considered picking up for good. I touched his hair for a parting kiss, and he rolled away with a snort and a shrug. I decided to leave him and move back in with my parents.

I took two consecutive shots of Grey Goose.

I watched the ten o'clock news and cursed the media. I tried to finish schoolwork through a whirlwind of clothes, reading Dante as I shoved all of my belongings into a burgundy suitcase. I was trying to leave before he returned to consciousness. I wondered if I should tell my parents I'm coming. I got hot, sweaty, and damn-near hysterical. Then I fainted.

I opened my eyes to the flat white ceiling, and I focused on that dizzy feeling. I remembered how the sound of the T.V. went deaf right before I hit the ground, and how my vision diminished to that foggy porthole like the closing portholes that end cartoons. I thought of the fog and getting lost. This time I wanted to get lost. I held my breath, trying to pass out again but soon quit. I was afraid of an aneurysm. Then I thought of steam, and I rushed to the bathroom. When I turned on the hot water I closed my eyes and listened for the tide. I pinched my clothes under the door and sat on the sink; eyes closed, and let the tiny apartment bathroom brim with steam. I needed to lose myself in a dense white steam, so that I could see clearly when I opened the door.

Ry

Allie Pierce

I lost your face
among the pages of my scrapbook.
It must have fallen in the cracks
between my Barbie Dolls
and the notice of your death.
That night at the skate center
when I kissed you,
I didn't know that someday
I would be driving down the interstate
trying to remember your eye color
and the sound of your voice,
only recalling the smell of rubber skate wheels.

Adopted
Bethany J. Pastoral

I am from a place far away
One I know nothing about
I am from unknown people with unknown faces
I am displaced
I am from rice, damp fields, red lettered calligraphy,
Bland hot tea
From festivals and rich spices that cause your eyes to water,
Bright lanterns, crowded streets,
Pushing, bumping, mumbled apologies,
where I'm from I don't stand out
From chop sticks I can't use
Thick city smog and tiny cramped apartments.
From unfortunate love and loneliness
More rice
I am from quiet shrines
Filled with reverence I don't have
From clean floors, pink sunsets, and white lotus,
Falling, covering the land—the place
The place I'm from which I've never known
And never will.

Now are you happy?
A poem to that girl across the room
Thomas Reece

White knights ride to your rescue.
Like a rock I fly towards you.
Your white feet trample upon—

This is going nowhere.
This is sounding so white bread.
Stillborn and generic and
I fear it will leave me wanting.

You too, I imagine.
Just thinking of you makes me
Want to whitewash.

Should I compare you
To the moon and stars somehow?
You, wonderful starling you.
Or should I romanticize the commonplace?
Your white shoes, perhaps?

What more can I say
Without going white faced?

I feel so short bus.
I don't know and frankly
I don't care anymore.
Now are you happy?
You ruined my poem.

Larissa E. Chavarria Smith **"Forest"**

On Women and Words
Dustin Meyer

Don't rape your words, young man.
Don't enslave your words.
No poet controls his poem.
Don't pet your words, kid.
They may stink and have fur
but they contain the poison
of previous philosophers and new.

Don't claim your words.
They don't belong to you.
Once they leave your hands,
your lips…it's over. Then go home,
sleep it off,
and come back in the morning
to ask your words what they meant.

Watch your back.
Sentences are Karmic.
Watch your ass,
bigot poets,
who treat their words
like "their" women.

I saw this happen.
A drunk college kid
with a napalm tongue
penetrating,
making beauty bleed
all over his pig skin, wolf soul.
Her shoulders dent under his spasm,
grasping fists.
She won't cry because…
like words…

never belonged to anybody.

Be slow and precise with your words,
fellow tongues.
Touch their backs softly,
tickle their necks, let them,
let them wrap their legs with you,
uncurl your eyes to them,
and never despise or spit
in the face of their favor.
When it rains they run
from page, from home.
They *will* defend themselves.
Let your words say things.
Let *them* do.

Can we describe words?
Words are hairy.
Words are hot, cold masculine,
feminine, distant, close,
brash, gorgeous, divine,
sexual, seducing, hungry,
full. They are undertakers,
priests, cops, arsons, thieves,
rapists, avengers,
foreigners, European,
grumpy old bastards,
cruel children,
drunk friends,
little clowns
entertaining patron ears,
jokes, one man acts,
famous dead people, quotes,

actors, liars,
racists, lovers.

I have a lover affair
with the words I speak,
cheating on a tame lazy tongue.
So drunky…
hey drunky…
please….
Fill your hands
with her smile.
Feel
your hands with her smile.

The Promotion

Leigh Krampe

This town is too small.
I saw her on a billboard today,
at the corner of Broadway
and the Bypass,
trumpeting her flawless record
of real estate transactions.
Her vacant face was a smiling mess
of Photoshop blur filters
but her navy blazer was crisp
and neat.

Last night she came in
fifteen minutes before closing,
stumbling on her heels,
nostrils inflamed,
and bellowed for more sake.
They kept us there an hour,
toasting her promotion
and tipping well for once,

while she swayed
atop her barstool to music
that wasn't there
with soggy eyelids
and sore sinus cavities,
her equally knackered
and more surgically enhanced
mother adjusting her cleavage
to go in for the kill.

Spring Cleaning

Brooke Shafar

The blacktop driveway had wrinkled and weakened with age.

This was the first thing I noticed when I arrived at my father's house. Certain that the grass had instigated an uprising from beneath the smothering black pavement, I drove up the path anyway—disturbing a silence months old that drifted in the air like dust particles.

My father was dead.

If he had not died, I would not have been making this trip to a house that had been voluntarily deserted by him a year or so before.

Perhaps deserted is too harsh a word.

Father needed more care than any family member not well-rehearsed in the medical field could give him, so he had decided to go to a nearby nursing home. I suppose he realized the cigarettes had killed him long before the cancer ever settled in his lungs, and was resigned to his fate of whirring oxygen tanks and not being able to hear the TV over his own hacking. But he refused to sell his house, refused to let the family clean everything up and out while he was in transition. Now that duty had been left to me.

Everything had been about perfection with him. Dad would've died again if he could've seen the grass so long it seemed to be creeping up the trunks of the pear and apple trees, as well as swallowing the red perennials he'd made me set out for him two summers before. The grass gave the yard a wild feeling; untamed, Nature had come to reclaim its territory. I popped open the door and slid out of the car.

A cloud of insects hovered around the trees he'd so carefully spaced in two even rows in one corner of the yard. The ground was peppered with pears and green apples in varying stages of rotting, some of which were writhing with the buzzing and crawling of insects over their surfaces. My twin brothers, Jacob and Ben, had told me that the house and land had been attended to, but it was clear they'd left everything here to decay and disintegrate, hoping I might return while there was something left to salvage.

I hovered in front of the garage door. My hand reached for the knob and stopped. My feet were suddenly heavy, my head suddenly swimming. I rocked back on my heels to regain my balance. My thoughts raced far away from my father's empty house, the rogue lawn, and the frenzied insects ruining the fruit scattered across the ground. My breath left me and my heart pushed against my ribcage. I began to

regret my decision to return to this place alone.

"You're shaking again."

I was staring at the funeral clothes draped across the footboard of the bed and wringing my hands; I had traded my black suit for an old black t-shirt and some gray cotton shorts, and was sitting up against the headboard of the bed. Luke was watching me from the entrance to the bathroom, his expression sober, penetrating.

"It's not that bad," I attempted to shrug off his comment.

He climbed into bed, amber eyes never leaving mine. He took my hand in his, and shoved my fingertips against my own throat.

"Feel that?" he eyed me severely.

"What?"

"Your pulse."

"And?"

He released my fingers, "You shouldn't have to go back alone."

"What else can I do?"

"Make your brothers pull their own weight."

Luke fell silent. I brushed my fingertips through his short coal-black hair and asked, "What is it really?"

"Let me go with you."

"You've got to work."

"I can take off."

"And I can handle this."

"You shouldn't have to."

Luke and I stared at each other for several minutes. He sighed in defeat.

"Promise you'll call if you need me."

My hand grasped the worn metal handle of the garage door. It shrieked as rusted hinges ground against one another. A rush of air from inside reeking of stillness and quiet sliced through me, and I stepped through the entrance. Across the room, my father's old workbench was cluttered with random bits of junk, and spider webs blanketed everything on its surface. For a moment, I saw him there, cigarette clenched in his teeth, hovering over some car part or bit of machinery, his calloused hands covered in grease and tiny cuts. His already graying hair was mostly hidden by the same navy blue cap he had always worn, covered in the dirt of fishing trips and gardening days and long-forgotten baseball games.

Whatever he was trying to do, it was not going well. The familiar scowl etched itself into his features, darkening his sunken cheeks hidden beneath his whiskers. An instant later, the part flew across the garage and crashed into the overhead door. I jumped from the clang that reverberated in my memory.

The door leading into the house also whined in protest. I felt as though I had traveled to an alien planet—that the memories flashing through my mind belonged to someone else that lived in another lifetime. The last few months' worth of mail had been piled onto the kitchen table. I thought about sifting through the envelopes to see if there was anything important. But it didn't matter; Dad was already dead, and most of the mail wouldn't mean anything to my brothers and me. We'd already gotten the bills.

I wandered into the living room, flipping the light switch as I entered. My father's brown leather couch was bathed in a familiar orange glow, the same lumpy pattern of shadow washing across the wall. He hadn't changed anything about the room since I was a child a few decades before. The matching recliner sat in the opposite corner, an end table resting nearby holding his favorite white ash tray; there were still ashes and cigarette butts piled inside. The paint along that corner of the room was yellowed, probably from all the times he'd sat listening to the evening news, chain-smoking his way through the night and releasing breath after breath of toxin-laced carbon dioxide into the air.

The stench of cigarettes still lingered within the house even though all other familiar smells had long since dissipated. I wandered out of the living room and down the hallway, taking a brief moment to poke my head in the bathroom. Most of what he had used daily had been taken to the nursing home. I opened the closet door to see what had been left, and a wall of Old Spice slammed into me. I could see myself standing next to him, my eyes peering over the countertop as I watched him brush shaving cream onto his face. Occasionally, he'd dab a bit onto his finger and smear it on my nose, and grin at me through the mirror as I wiped it all over the towel next to the sink. I remember staring at his hands while he shaved, watching how quickly and easily they moved around his face; I always had such clumsy hands when I was little.

The room directly across from the bathroom was my old bedroom, which had been semi-converted into a storage room. The door was slightly ajar, and from outside I could see only a hint of the mess that lay within. I pushed against the door, but it budged little; I

squeezed into the room and discovered a stack of cardboard boxes had been left directly behind the door, perhaps to discourage people from entering. I guess Dad was ashamed of the mess he had never been brave enough to clean up. I stooped down to investigate. A trail of old toys belonging to Jake, Ben, and me created a trail leading to my white twin-sized bed that had been pushed into the far corner of the room and was now stacked with old clothes I had not seen since the last time I had worn them. I shuffled a few of the outfits around. Dresses. I couldn't recall the last time my parents had put me in a dress.

This room was also where all of my mother's belongings had been stashed after she left, stowed away immediately thereafter, almost as if she had never existed in the first place. The sliding doors of the closet bulged at the hinges where they had been stuffed to overflowing with things my father could not get rid of yet couldn't stand to look at. I tried to open the doors, couldn't. I reached inside and felt around for what might be hindering their progress, and slammed my wrist when I removed whatever had held them in place. What was left of my mother's clothes hung lifelessly in front of my eyes. The bottom of the closet was filled with Father's old photo albums. I don't think he had looked at them since my mother left.

The mess could wait. There were two rooms left to explore. The first had originally been Jake and Ben's bedroom, but our father had converted it into a study. The room itself had been left extraordinarily plain. The off-white walls had been left bare, and there was no furniture save the antique roll-top desk and matching chair. Both pieces were constructed of dark wood—whether the color was achieved naturally or through a staining process, I was not sure. The color did not match the off-white walls or the sandy-colored carpet. At least I knew there was one room that would require very little cleaning and sifting. No bookshelf, table, or lamp. He would sit for hours under the garish glow of the ceiling fan light to carry out whatever it was he would do at the desk.

When my brothers were the inhabitants, the room was much more alive, with posters of baseball players and football stars that I couldn't remember the names of covering almost all of the walls. They'd slept in bunk beds for most of their childhood, and would oftentimes fight with one another over who got to spend the night in the top bunk. There were a couple of bookshelves in the room then as well along the opposite wall. They kept a desk that sat just beneath their window. I could hear their almost identical voices chattering away then,

and imagine their bright blue eyes flashing in rhythm to one another.

I left the "study" and stood at the end of the hallway, staring through the final doorway, the master bedroom. I hesitated again, listening to the shouts and screams echoing down the hallway from years past behind the door that was carefully closed.

Once my parents had forgotten to close the door. I was sitting in the living room with Jake and Ben, attempting to keep their little blonde heads out of trouble and away from the back bedroom. But the shouting was lasting longer than usual. In my misguided attempts to pretend to be in charge, I decided to investigate. I slipped slowly and silently down the hall, until I could peer into the crack of the doorway. I don't remember what they were fighting over. I can't even recall making sense out of their raised voices; the sounds were merely that, devoid of any linguistic meaning. All I remember is seeing them, staring at one another from opposite sides of the bed, a cigarette hanging from Father's mouth, the aggression in their postures causing the hairs on the back of my neck to stand on end and my face and neck to burn.

I crouched against one wall, not wanting to bear witness but unable to make myself move. All I could see of my mother was the back of her red housedress and her long dark hair pulled back into a ponytail slipping back and forth across her back in time to her movements. The argument continued like that for a few minutes, until Dad walked out from behind the bed and moved closer to Mom. His hand was up and down in a moment, and I clenched my face about the time his open-handed blow struck her. I heard her stumble back against the wall, and a small gasp escaped from me before I could control it. Father's face snapped in my direction, and his eyes doubled in size when he saw me sitting there. He nearly dropped his cigarette. The door slammed so hard the rest of the house seemed to tremble. By this time, my brothers had stuck their heads around the corner; I glanced back to see four blue eyes peering in my direction. They waited at the end of the hallway as I listened to the sound of muffled voices from within the room. They grew softer, apologetic. A few minutes later, the door was gently opened. Mom came out first, picked me up off the floor, motioned for my brothers to follow her. We sat together in the living room for the rest of the night until it was time for us to go to bed. My brothers played with each other in the floor. Mom kept me in her lap, her dark amber eyes never leaving me. Mom tucked us in, kissed us goodnight, and nothing else was said. We did not see Father again until the next morning.

I was on my knees, staring into the bedroom that my father seldom frequented after my brothers, my mother, and I left him alone. The bed was made, the dresser in perfect order. There was a slight film of dust over everything, including the nightstand by the bed where a picture of my parents clowning with each other at some family picnic still rested. Otherwise, nothing had been disturbed—not even by time itself.

I suddenly felt cold, and wrapped my arms around myself. I couldn't remember what I was doing there in the first place, why I had been crazy enough to return. I wondered where my brothers were, and how they ought to be sitting here as well, remembering that which they have no desire to recall. I didn't want to go inside the room. I wished I had never stepped foot inside the house.

Memories played out in real time. I had become an observer of my own childhood, my mind re-creating snippets of scenes from the film of my life. I sat in the center of the house and listened to our family in fast-forward, years passing by with the ghosts of ourselves carrying on as if time had never moved. As if they still lived there. I heard them speaking, voices mixing together across time and space. I listened to my pleadings to my mother not to leave, to Jacob and Ben's whining when they were told to do homework, to the sound of my father puffing on a cigarette. I wanted to leave, but I couldn't seem to move; I might disturb the events of the past. Then I'd somehow mess with causality, affect something from the past, and mess everything up: past, present, and future.

The next thing I felt was a hand on my shoulder. I jerked in fright and turned to see my husband, Luke, standing over me, his amber eyes flickering about as he assessed me.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"He didn't mean to do it."

"What?"

"He wasn't like that all the time."

"I should get you home."

"He'd just lose it sometimes."

"Ben and Jake are here. They're going to start boxing things up."

"I—what?"

"I told them that it was time they took care of you for a change."

I heard the back door shriek as they walked in, carrying empty cardboard boxes. They walked through the kitchen and came down the

hallway, stepping over Luke and me so that they might enter Father's bedroom. I started to follow them, but Luke held me back.

"There's nothing for you to see."

"But they're not supposed to go back there. Dad'll—"

"He's dead."

I ceased my tugging against Luke's hold. After a few minutes of listening to my brothers at work, he climbed to his feet, and pulled me up behind him. He led me out of the house, out of the garage, out into what was now an evening twilight. We sat down at the edge of the blacktop, and I realized that the grass had been mowed while I was inside. I picked up a few severed blades and ran them between my fingers.

"They were here earlier," I heard Luke say.

"I didn't hear it."

"I know."

"What changed their minds?"

"They saw your car here. They called and asked what you were doing. I guess they felt guilty."

"Oh."

"You didn't call me."

"No, I didn't."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I don't think I've been all 'here' today."

"I know. I wish you hadn't been 'here' by yourself."

Later, we walked through the rows of fruit trees; the rotting apples and pears had been removed from the path, and the insects were gone. The stars were visible in the sky overhead, far from any city lights. I found the Big Dipper, and from there began to point out other constellations—all right where they should have been. During high school, I would take books outside with maps of the night sky and search for ancient images within the stars above the house. With the yard again domesticated and the night sky present, things seemed almost normal. Of course, Luke had never seen the house at this time of day before. He patiently followed me, listened to me talk about constellations for a while. Finally, he interrupted my astronomical monologue.

"Can I take you home now?"

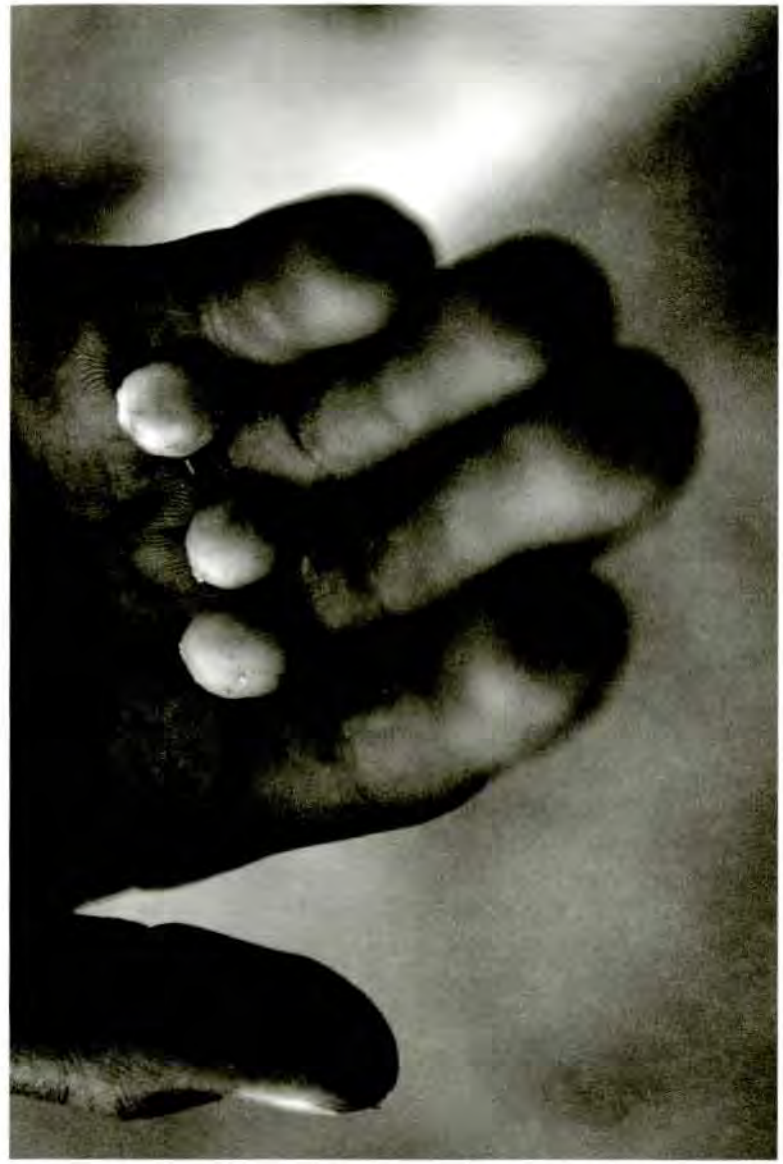
I smiled. "I think you already have."

Five Meters
Anthony Scott Wilson

The summer glints off of your sunglasses and
Strikes me in the eye and as I begin to twist away
I am reminded of the physics of light and
The unknown and how they've found
That two electrons, separated and alone,
going in opposite directions can behave strangely.
On strikes a reflective piece of glass and
Bounces away at the perpendicular
While the other, connected by God knows what,
Stops at the speed of light, bounces off nothing,
And flies into the face of logic at the same angle

Two entities flying through infinity five meters apart
Until the energy of the universe is gone and
they fade into blissful nothingness or until they are absorbed,
One catches in my eye, one tangles in your hair
As we glance at one another and go on our way

To the chapel to visit the family of two brothers, 13 and 15,
The older boy stricken by a heart attack and
As he was dying in the hospital,
His grief stricken brother, running in
From the summer hot parking lot
Faltered, fell, and died
Within minutes of one another
They were speeding away
Into space
At the perpendicular
Five meters apart.



untitled
Melanie Blanding

Smart Redneck
Jeff Tetrault

Whiz kid with a mullet,
handy with a protractor
and a bullet.

Velocity times distance equals
another pair of antlers
over the fireplace.

He built his own hemi
for the science fair
but blew the money

on beer and fireworks.
They was worth it, Pa said.
Were worth it, Pa.

At night he climbs on top
of the single-wide
to gaze at Ursa Major

and dip.

Christina
Bobby Deignan

She stiffens.
She crawls
through this ocean of parched grass
gathering
rising about her twisted shape
as she searches the horizon:
formless, ashen.
Watching the house…
the barn
like two sun-bleached beacons
at the ends of the earth.
A breeze whips through the field,
brushing waves into the golden meadow
and folds into her paisley dress.
She lowers herself down to the baked earth
to ponder the ghostly echoes,
that cry
in the middle
of nowhere.

Ritalin
Jason Sloan

I awoke to the beautiful dull sun
and to a wonderful disadvantage
I
showered
shaved
brushed
and
combed
all in a good manner
and
with mechanical precision . . .

untitled
Jenica Miller

The Real Thing
Heather Whited

The lamp
the art class
put on me
burned a spot
into my neck
that was brown
in the middle
but told a true tale
with exhausted red
at the edges.
But I stood
still as I could
and watched paint
appear cautiously
on the canvas
like a shy child.
I watched
faces that looked up at me:
tilted
scrunched
and blank.
And I wondered
am I God
to any one of these,
inspiration
to any one of these,
or just
a tired model
waiting for her ten dollars?
My hips whined,
sent echoes
to my back
and shoulders

and my arms
long past tingling
to the dull
memory of feeling
but I dared
not
move
and
risk
the picture.

Mother Song
John Stanford Owen

I used to live there,
under 45 acres of
bullet shells
and loosened teeth—every
bearded, catatonic,
cataclysmic, euphoric
beauty queen and
western songbird
lived there—under 10,000
folds of skin,
3rd rate motels, the smell
of old paint.
Sally Scissors
lived there,
in the house
of an aging
showgirl and the
stench of stale cigarettes:
crucifixes on the walls,
ships in bottles,
the showgirl's
homemade pornography
strewn on the walls
of closets.
And when we left there,
Sally asked, "Do I look
like her?"
And she cried
when I lied
that she didn't.
And the same
frail eyes
leaking into my

chest peered at
me through dirty
window-panes,
asking, "Love me
like you love her."
And quickly,
I turned away.

Lorelei Esker **untitled**

‚Ambiguous?
Kenneth J. Fry

I wonder what Ambiguous looks like naked.
Comma eyes and question mark thighs.
Ambiguous is a Greek Goddess.
I took her out, what a flirt.
A sharp dresser, cool in a hot way.
All the cats dig her, but one man—
Named Literally—
Can't forgive her.
He is all exclamation points and periods.
Oh, to play with his heart,
To say one thing and mean another.
She bent over backwards to make him suffer.
She told him to define the word love.
That was the final straw
She guffaws.
He said he could never understand her and he left.
He meant it too.

Butterfly

Bobby Deignan

Two
paper-thin sunbursts
outstretched.

Like plates
of dawn-colored
stained glass.
These great sails
seized summer winds
lifting and raising,
the white dots
flashing.

Two maps
of orange lands
divided by
rivers of black
tar.
Or perhaps
tree branches
spreading
against the
twilight.

Ashes to Water

Joanne Elrick

I had been keeping Dad inside the liquor cabinet about three weeks now. The expected knock on my front door a few minutes after 9 p.m. was my cue that it was time to let him go.

"Are you ready to do this?" Elena, a longtime friend of the family who had been my best friend over the past couple weeks, asked when I opened the door. She hugged her brown leather jacket tightly around her to fend against the chill of the late December night air.

"I guess as ready as I can be." I threw on my black peacoat and picked up the burgundy-colored paperboard box from my dining room table. The lid was adorned by a mailing-label sticker that read "Williamson Mortuary, Lemon Grove, CA" and underneath that, "ID: ELRICK, JOHN". The box itself was roughly twelve inches tall and nine inches wide, and weighed about eight pounds. When Mr. Williamson, the funeral home owner, delivered the box to me, I quietly marveled at how my 6'2", 250-lb father could be compacted to neatly fit into such a small box, even considering the wasting effects of the Lou Gehrig's disease that delivered him to the mortician's oven door. We all learn in our grade school science classes that our bodies are composed of 85 percent water, but I could never truly visualize this fact until I was confronted with my Dad's ashes.

We walked out to the parking lot of my apartment complex, and I got into the passenger seat of Elena's gold Honda Accord and cradled the box in my lap. Elena turned the ignition and looked over at my grim cargo.

"That box is pretty sturdy, right? You don't think anything's going to fall out into the car, do you?"

"Oh, I'm sure it will be fine," I assured Elena. "The ashes are sealed up tight in a plastic bag inside the box."

"You've looked at them? What do they look like?" Elena's voice carried no disgust, just the same visceral curiosity that drives many of us to gawk when we pass a gory automobile accident.

"It's not nearly as grisly as one might think. It looks like a pile of beach sand, only it's gray. It has these pearly colored flecks throughout—I guess those are bone shards."

Elena said nothing, and only squirmed a little in response. She slowed the car down as we approached Fletcher's Cove public beach. The parking lot was completely empty, the lifeguard's stations were

vacant and the condominiums that surrounded the beach were for the most part dark, or had closed curtains. This was fortunate; I think what I planned to do at the beach was technically illegal.

I got out of the Honda with Dad's box in my arms and headed down the cement walkway that led from the parking lot to the beach, enjoying the dull crunch of sand grains under my shoes. I was happy to see the water was at low tide. The white foam at the top of the waves was illuminated by the three-quarters-full moon. Although it was December, the sky was cloudless, and the breeze carried a fresh, briny aroma. Dad would have thought this was beautiful night, and I could visualize him walking along the shore on a night like this.

Elena stopped midway down the ramp and softly set her hand on my arm.

"I'll wait right here. Take as long as you need."

I smiled back at her and continued toward the final resting place my father had requested in the months preceding his death. Once I reached the sand, I stopped to open the lid of the box and I opened the plastic bag, which was secured with a plastic bread-bag style tab. Dad's ashes were now exposed to the moonlight and sparkled due to the bone fragments reflecting the moonbeams. I held my breath in out of a squeamish fear of inhaling ashes, picked the box up and trudged into the waves up to mid-thigh. Ignoring the discomfort of the cold water, I shut my eyes and hurled the ashes into the water. Once the sifting sound ceased, I opened my eyes and sent the bag adrift into the undulating sea foam. I didn't look back as I walked back onto the beach and headed back up the cement walkway to Elena, who was calmly smoking a cigarette.

"All done," I announced.

"Already? Was it rough for you?"

"No, I'm okay. This is a pretty night, and I can't think of a better time for this. This is probably what my Dad had in mind."

Elena nodded and looked toward the water.

"Goodbye John."

Me, In the Image of My Mother

Jessica Bates

Finally I just gave up and became my mother,
her endless questions filled my small throat
and I opened my mouth and heard her voice.
I threw my head back, mimicked her deep laugh,
from the pit of her stomach, my stomach,
the stomach they sliced open like a ripe tomato
to pull my five pound bloody body out, barely
breathing. I slipped like a silver fish from one
existence to another. She guided my hair while
I fell asleep in her lap, told me about sex
after I bled for the first time. My chest sprouted
A-cups just like hers, but more firm, and my hair
began to curl. At twenty, I stole her
young green eyes, her love for margaritas, her
smooth slender fingers. My eyes learned the
playful art of seduction. In church today,
during the last hymn, I held her hand. I feel
her bones small between my fingers, and I
think that someday I will become her mother too.

The Geoffrey McCelvey Memorial Award was first presented in 1983 in memory of the son of an English Department faculty member. Other recipients of this award appear in the retrospective: Elaine Ayers (1984), Amy Wallace (1985), Chuck Keefover (1989), Brent Fisk (1992), Ann Qualls (1993), Stephanie Pippin (1994), John Broyles (1995), Joe Schmidt (1996), Linda Watkins Price (1997), Amy Croslin (1998), Tracy S. Epley (2000), Laura Collins (2002), Marci Kacsir (2004), and Travis Morris (2005).

The Facts of Life

Bobby Harrell

Before David is born, his father whispers to his mother's belly and tells him that life is unfair. Upon hearing the news, David decides not to be born. He closes the walls of the uterus and tacks up a "Home, Womb, Home" sign. Years go by. Having to compensate for her growing son's hunger, David's mother eats anything that is set in front of her. David's father has to stop buying strawberry-scented candles because of this. David wants to grow up to be an architect, so he takes internet courses and learns to draw, all from his mother's now grossly swollen belly. Just when his parents can't stand their child's rudeness any longer, an idea is born. David's father puts his lips very close to David's mother's belly and says that life eventually ends. David emerges, wearing suit and tie, briefcase in hand.

Hiroshima in June

Leigh Krampe

Hiroshima is different from what you'd expect. In history class, they show you a picture of sepia-toned wasteland that might as well be Mars and tell you we dropped a couple bombs on two cities with names so far away they might not even exist at all. And just like that, the war was over.

It wasn't what I expected at all—the sunny weather, and the efficient buses with their velveteen curtains. The disproportionate amount of bridal shoppes and the pachinko parlors with Ultraman beckoning gamblers, the pleasant shopping arcade muzak and the giggling schoolchildren tucked into their uniforms, yellow hats glinting two by two. I wasn't expecting the massive pleasure district with workers in fantastic evening gowns enticing customers into heart-shaped neon façades. It seemed just like every other city we'd been to so far.

And the accent is on the "ro" when pronounced, not the "shima."

In the West Building of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, there are fingernails of a victim of the bombing in a solitary glass case. They curl long and black and brittle, with the shriveled grey skin clinging in shards. I stood before them long after my audio tour said to move on to the tattered school uniform in the next case, charred by a heat no one had felt until August 6, 1945. The fingernails came from eight year-old nail beds that had been neatly trimmed and crescent-mooned, and were used along with those of other children and civilians to fortify one of Japan's most important military ports in the Emperor's total war. His mother had saved them for years, long after they had rotted off, along with the rest of her son's skin.

The East Building is dedicated to showing how Hiroshima looked before Little Boy fell. There is important historical information about the period of expansion before the war, dioramas of the city, all your usual museum fare. A corridor filled with optimistic children's artwork leads to the West Building, and there visitors are greeted by life-size wax figures of civilian victims, shredded flesh dangling from their bones. Their eyes are wide and their mouths jut outward and down to form the shape of prayers that would never be answered. In America, there would be a large warning of graphic content to protect the young and the naive. Here, there is no warning—this is something that should be seen by everyone, especially the young and the naive.

In the Peace Memorial Park that surrounds the museum, I squinted in the crisp linen sunlight at all the monuments and memorials spread out across the lushly landscaped green space. A large mound holds the dust of the still-unidentified victims from sixty years ago. A modern, geometric bronze sculpture and hundreds of thousands of origami paper cranes pay tribute to radiation victim Sadako Sasaki—her fingers stretch up towards the sky, chin uplifted and forehead smooth, as though waiting to catch something else that might fall suddenly from above. Another recently added statue is a memorial to the Korean workers who died in the bombing—they are not recognized in the official Japanese register of victims.

That night in our room at the Hiroshima Grand Intelligent Hotel, I sat in the tiny bathroom atop our automated toilet with spray, bidet, and blow-dry functions and sobbed, crushed by the weight of the sadness and the anger and the blame that had been thrust at me ever-so-discreetly all day long. I had seen the blame in the sunken eyes of the scarred elderly on the bus, their silent, unceasing hatred of those of my race who did this to them burning through me. The sadness sang silently in the elegant tiled dove reliefs on the subway walls, a plea for peace, a call for the end of nuclear armament altogether. I heard the anger when I returned to America, in my grandfather's shaking voice telling me that had we not dropped those bombs, he and all other American men would have been castrated and the women raped and I would have been born *Japanese*.

That night I wept not for myself, not for the Americans who died to save us, not for the Japanese who died at our hands, and not for every fact that has been skewed in every history book on both sides. I didn't know who I was crying for or why I was crying at all. At that point, it didn't matter anymore.

The Wanda Gatlin Essay Award began as the Zephyrus Essay Award in 1988 but was renamed in 1990 to honor a faculty advisor who worked diligently to keep this publication alive. Recipients presented in the retrospective are Rebecca Carter (1988), Beth Kemper (1991), Wes Berry (1994), Mikki Olmsted (1999), and Zacchaeus Compson (2004).

untitled

Edward Linsmier

The Color of Coal
T. Eugene Morris

She was a square jaw
doll from the
eastern coal fields,
her body bricked
by laboring and
the bedroom dash
but her quick feet
couldn't carry
her from reputation.

That's how we met
half-naked, dirt road,
near a rotten possum
10 miles from a streetlight.
I wished so many nights
her name was Mae
but daughters of union presidents
are not as flaked
as the black chips
of an empty mine.
Rochelle spoke New York jive
and bet me 5 on life
with snake eyes down
we'd never get caught,
and we'd never
live like my parents
if we stole her father's truck
until the gas left us
in another state
looking for work
and finally living.

The amount of unrest

in her bones
was enough
to delouse a Hazard hillside
but not save her
from becoming
just another
legend of the holler.

The day after she told me
she was late
I told her father,
and he handed me a pick,
said I might make foreman.
She jumped into Halman's Gap
5 weeks later,
but I kept the job.

The Jim Wayne Miller Poetry Award was first presented in 2002 in honor of the Appalachian poet, scholar, and WKU faculty member. Three other recipients of this award appear in the retrospective: Trish Lindsey Jaggers (2002), Jeff Crady (2003), and Tara Koger (2005).

Loam
Dave Shackelford

I can feel my atoms,
Your atoms,
All flailing about like flies
While the road turns
Into fingertips.
The canned eyes and ears
In the driver's closet
Are old
And a few of them are awake,
But on the same hand are wandering
Blind,
Absent of headship
Like the wilderness outside these windows.
My words can swim the sky,
Through the dirty oxygen,
But only the birds
Give a standing ovation.

Dusk Flees
Stephanie Hatfield

Trees swallow the sun
Orange and lilac diffuse
Across our faces

Gold rays caress
grassy fields—weeds wave to
tickle our feet

As day fades
Fireflies dazzle
The landscape

Inhale
Aren't we alive?
We are

Please
Linger
Light

Silent

Night

What Remains
Tina Barnt

Splattered sanguine sap
on the wall
behind
the blue recliner,
where we used to
laugh
and talk
about what we'd
name the kids.

"Barren"
Christina Pollard

Sun in my Room
Samantha Mudd

I woke up early confused by
a red glow
touching my room.
Heavy,
my head rolled to see his face.
Calm and asleep.
The red glow had gotten him too.
Burning with crimson,
I rested my head on
his vulnerable back.
Now I could see
the sun had risen in my room.

Why I am a Vegetarian
Lacy Patterson

Once I listened to two guys talk about fucking around.
I was disgusted; these ugly Spinosauri
Dripping with semen and saliva as thick as applesauce,
Reptilian and coarse-skinned;
Carnivorous. But I wanted to be that girl—
I wanted them to mash me up in their triangle teeth
And leave my bloody remains among the sagebrush and lightning bugs.
I wanted to be the girl they were sweating out of their pores,
Making their jeans tight and their hands dance.

Touch me;
I am an embossed strawberry—
Red and swollen, bursting with seed and vegetation and penetrable skin.
They would gnash several of me in their sweaty teeth at once.
Silk dresses that crest in an oval just below the shoulders;
Packaged like a downy mink, but with red teeth
And the wrath of Juggernaut.
We have to eat, too. We are as thirsty as you.

This time I'm wide awake,
Burned down to nothing but a steaming pile of ash,
Carcasses lying among the moonwort and beetles.
A voyeur sky is drinking us up as tongues pant and eyes burst.
Is this a mutual rape or a convergence of appetites?
Our bellies are full.
We roll and trundle through the brush like warthogs.
I crawl back to my tree-knot,
And you to your long-necked sweating and drizzling of spit.

A Solstice Song

Rosemarie Wurth-Grice

When I was a girl I made a wish on
the wind and watched it bend the grasses in
the fields and chase the leaves from the trees
to sail across the years in search of—

Today we have flung open the Temple doors,
washed the steps with rain
brought here by a northern wind
heavy with the scent of balsam.

The candles burn brightly, whisper in foreign phrases,
flickering words that we have come to speak,
tendered by mossy thoughts,
keeping us warm even on this
the longest and darkest of winter nights.

Secret Identities

Corey Alderdice

Wednesday has to be just about the greatest day of the week—at least to me. Most people look forward to Friday, with a full weekend of no school or work in sight. Others are big fans of Sunday, a day of rest, religion and professional sports. Me, I'm a Wednesday kind of guy, and not because it's hump day. It's comic book day.

"Hey, Ben," Chuck says as I walk into Secret Identities. It's 3:35 on a Wednesday afternoon at the most out-of-the way comic book store in town. And like every other Wednesday, I'm the only person in here.

"You realize I could set my clock by you. Is it 3:35 already?" He doesn't bother looking up from his indy rock magazine. Chuck's almost thirty. Chuck's almost always been about thirty, at least as long as I can remember. He inherited Secret Identities from his father, a comic book geek of a simpler time, with simpler heroes. The place hasn't changed a bit as long as I can remember, and I've been coming here for almost six years. Sure, there are different books on the wall and more back issues now than then, but it's still the same poorly lit labor of love it always was and I guess will always be.

"What've we got today, Chuck?" I sit a Taco Bell bag down on the counter. Chuck and I have a standing deal, I bring him two cheesy bean burritos and a large Mountain Dew every Wednesday at 3:35. He always pays me back, but he can't leave the store so I bring it to him. I figure it's my way of staying on his good side. He, in return, lets me in the store. I consider it my community service. Chuck's a great guy, a real friend, but you can only take so many questions from a sixteen-year-old about comic books before you go berzerk. I mean, even the biggest fanboy has his limits. Chuck sets his magazine aside and inspects the bag.

"You did get the Fire sauce, right?" he says through a gulp of soda.

"You did get the new Ultimate Spider-Man, right?"

"Yup."

"Yup," I say pulling the packets of sauce from my pocket.

"Okay, I'll leave you to your moment." Chuck picks the magazine back up and focuses his attention on the burrito.

I squeeze through the rows of long, rectangular cardboard boxes to the back of the room. This is my Sabbath. This is my Church of the

Superhero. The back wall lined with wire framed shelves each nook holding a new sacred text with my communion. These are my Stations of the Sequential Art, frame by frame...page by page...issue by issue. Each glossy cover with a new gospel inside. This is what it feels like to be alive, or at least a comic book geek.

"You may wanna look at the new Fantastic Four," Chuck mumbles in between bites of burrito. "There's supposed to be a Spidey crossover this month."

I pick five books from the wall, one I've never even heard of, but it looks cool. My mom won't be home for another hour and a half, so I decide to stick around in the store today and go through the back issues. Chuck's been collecting comic books since he was a kid. Chuck father's, who died last year, had been collecting since the forties. He always loved telling the story of how he had a copy of Action Comics #1—the first appearance of Superman. He sold it to start his own store back in the eighties. He was in his forties at the time, recently divorced, and wanted to start a new life for himself and his son Chuck. So, he used the money from the book and began life anew. Chuck took it pretty badly when his father passed, but he was always happy at the store, and it's what his father would have wanted. I guess that's why Chuck's always been so cool with me. I like to think of him as something like a big brother.

"What'cha lookin' for?" Chuck asks as he sits down on the floor next to me. He reeks of salsa and garlic.

"I don't know," I say, "I've just been wondering lately more and more why Peter Parker does what he does . You know, why he's Spider-Man."

Chuck smiles, "With great power comes..."

I cut him off, even the most basic fan of Spider-Man knows this one. Even the lameoes who've only seen the movie can regurgitate, "Great responsibility, but what's the point?"

"I guess that's something we've all gotta figure out." Chuck's expression goes blank for a moment, he's about to say something important. His forehead always creases when he gets ready to make a profound statement. "You know, when my dad left me the store, I didn't know if I wanted to sell it or keep it open."

"Really?" I interject, almost in a panic of disbelief. "Cause, I mean, I'd wet myself if I had the chance to run a comic shop. Seriously. Who wouldn't wanna run a shop like this?"

"At the time," Chuck mumbles lost in his own thought, "not me, but the store was important to my dad and he wanted me to have it. Don't get me wrong, I love Wednesdays just as much as you. I love the feeling of opening up the box of comics and smelling the gloss on the page. It's a lot of responsibility, though—taxes, invoices, bills, bills, and more bills."

He's lost me. Adults usually lose me when they start talking about bills and other stuff like that. It's like when my mom and dad used to argue about bills. Actually, they'd argue over just about everything—even me. I think that's when I started spending more time at Secret Identities. It's when I became a regular, when Chuck and his dad actually learned my name. I didn't have a lot of money at the time, so I didn't buy a lot of comics. Come to think of it, most weeks I just looked at the books. A lot of shop owners would yell at kids like me and say, "Hey, this ain't a library. Either buy something or leave."

I snap back to reality and Chuck's still talking, "So I guess that's why he says with great power comes great responsibility." Chuck gives me the look that says that I'm just a kid and not quite old enough for the whole thing to make sense, and it bugs the crap out of me.

"Yeah, uh huh." I pretend like I was listening. He'll probably repeat the same conversation. Chuck has a knack for telling the same story over and over again, but he's cool to me so I can't complain.

"Here," he says handing me several issues of the Spectacular Spider-Man," read up on these and see if it answers your questions, but don't get any chocolate or whatever on them."

"Wouldn't dream of it." Like I say, Chuck's a pretty good guy...even if he's thirty-something. He's probably the coolest adult I know. "Well, I gotta go. If I don't beat my mom home, I'll be in a crapload of trouble."

"How much is a 'crapload' of trouble?" Chuck looks amused.

"A lot." I say while walking out the door of the store. It's a late September day—cold enough that I should be wearing a jacket, but not cold enough to worry about freezing to death. I catch a bus across town and walk the rest of the mile home. It's just an apartment, nothing fancy or anything, but I guess it's home. After mom and dad got a divorce and mom got custody of me, we moved into the city and into this place. She's worked really hard to make it look like our old home. Dad never liked Mom's taste in furniture, so she kept most of it. Problem is that it's too big for the apartment...that, and it's pink with flowers.

That's why I don't invite friends home. Well, if I had friends to invite home, I wouldn't...because of the couch. I turn the television on

to MTV in time to catch the last bit of TRL. Mom keeps saying I should take an interest in something other than comic books. I think it's best for me to pretend to be normal. Besides, I like the background noise while I read, like my own personal soundtrack to the story. I carefully open the polybags protecting Chuck's comics. I treat it like it's a really expensive piece of glass even though they're only worth a couple of bucks apiece, but I wouldn't want to make Chuck mad. The last thing I need is another adult mad at me.

Before I know it, five o'clock rolls around and Mom comes through the front door with a sack of groceries in her arms. She's out of breath. What my mom doesn't tell people is that her hair started turning gray last year, so she's been dyeing it. It's a little more brown than it used to be. She told everyone she felt like a change, what with getting divorced and all. She wanted a makeover—I think that's what she said. So, she took part of the divorce settlement and bought new clothes and new makeup (the good kind from the department stores) and new shoes. I even got a pair of Chuck Taylor All-Stars out of the deal. She said something about reading in a magazine that these were the shoes that every teenager wanted. Actually, I wanted shoes with Velcro, but she said Velcro shoes were for preschoolers. My response to that was so what.

"How do you feel about meatloaf for dinner tonight?" she says. She's frantically moving around the kitchen putting stuff away. She always seems in a hurry these days, I don't know why.

I offer a noncommittal, "Whatever."

"I guess we could have beef stroganoff or some other Hamburger Helper."

"Whatever."

She stops. When she stops, that means she's mad. "Did something happen at school today?"

"What do you mean?"

"What do I mean? I mean, did you get into trouble again?"

"Depends on what you mean by trouble."

"Your attitude, Ben, doesn't make things better. Was it a fight again?"

I cringe at the word fight. It's not really fair to call it a fight after all. Usually, it's me getting the crap kicked out of me before some teacher shows up. I'm just guilty by association. Calling it a fight would at least mean I was able to put up some sort of resistance.

"You know what, Ben? You should try making some friends,

find some people with similar interests—even join a club or play a sport. I don't know...something." She's getting frustrated. She sits down when she's frustrated.

"I'm fine, mom. Meatloaf sounds fine for dinner."

"You know you can talk to me, right?" Adults always want you to talk to them, but I'm never really sure if they mean it. They probably just want to sound like they care.

"I know, mom." I try to act sincere, "I know."

"Well, good," she says, a renewed sense of hope in her voice like she's done an A+ job of parenting and deserves an award. "How about you go in your room and do your homework and I'll have dinner ready in about an hour, cool?"

She just said cool. Sometimes, it's just funny and sad how much she tries to be a good mom, a cool mom. "Okay, I just have some reading to do."

"Not the comic books," she cuts me off mid sentence. "The English and the social studies. Do those and then you can read whatever comic book you want."

"Fine," I say. Leaving the kitchen I hear a clang of pots and pans start. I also hear my mom sigh really, really hard. It must suck being an adult. I bet it does.

Thursday morning comes with a sky full of dark gray clouds and plenty of rain. I'm late for class, a fact that I'm sure will not escape my mom's attention. That's okay, though. The good thing about Thursday mornings is that I have American History. It's not that I like history or anything, it's just that Candace Bennett is in my class. She's a senior and way beautiful. Her red hair falls about half-way down her back. She could be a model. Rumor has it she once modeled for *Teen Vogue* or *CosmoGirl* or some other magazine only for the photo to show up under some Q&A article about what to do if you get an STD. But she was actually in a magazine and so popular that no one cared. I heard this from someone else, so I don't know if it's actually true or not.

That's the way high school works. Lots of stories float around—thirty-two page one-shot editions. No continuity to worry about or drama from issue to issue. No one collects the one-shots because they rarely have any value, but you find them in the back issues every now and again and remember the story. My story is like an ongoing monthly series with drama that you just can't get rid of.

Here's the basic origin story. The first frame shows young Ben

Bridges arriving at a new school. In later issues we will find out that his parents were recently divorced and that's why he's in a new town. What's important for the first few frames is that he's the new kid in school, fairly tall, but horribly skinny and awkward with acne. That sets the stage for the hero's first complication. His first day in class, he meets Candace Bennett, the true femme fatale. The scene briefly flashes back to Ben's old school where he didn't talk to people and didn't have a lot of friends. But the narrator says that this is a new opportunity and that Ben's gonna make the most of it.

Turn the page.

Ben's talking to Candace, she's even laughing. Ben actually managed to tell a joke—a fact that the narrator describes as a rarity. The new few panels follow a silhouette coming closer and closer to Ben's back. We learn this is Tripp Gibson, Candace's football/track/baseball all-star boyfriend.

Pow.

"What do you think you're doing, geek boy?" Tripp pushes our hero to the ground, much to the delight of those standing by. "Who said you could talk to my girlfriend?"

The narrator tells us that it hurt when Ben hit the ground. It really, really hurt.

"Leave him alone, Tripp," Candace interjects. "He was just being friendly."

"Well, the friendly new guy needs to go somewhere else. Why don't you take your comic books and hang out some little kids" The next two pages are a full spread with Tripp standing over the fallen hero. He says, "Maybe you should go to the library with the other geeks."

That's the last day Ben, well, I said anything at school other than answering questions from teachers. Sometimes the hero needs a mild-mannered secret identity so that he doesn't draw the attention of those around him. It's safer that way. It protects the ones he loves. Something like that.

Mr. Richard continues the lecture this morning on the build up to World War II and why the U.S. stood by and watched while all of Europe was getting taken over by a maniacal super villain. I'm drawing some random hero in my notebook. It's not a very good rendition of a hero, but he does have boots, gloves and some kind of squiggle for a logo. Those are pretty much the basics of any superhero.

"So, Ben," Mr. Richard inquires, "Why do you think President Roosevelt stood by and maintained his stance on U.S. Isolationism while

Hitler continued to cross the European continent committing countless atrocities along the way?"

Crap, I knew I should have been paying attention. Okay, I've got one shot at this. Here goes... "Well, with great power comes great responsibility, right. I mean it's like what Spider-Man says, isn't it. Roosevelt didn't want to jump into a war if he didn't have too, and as Commander In Chief, he had a lot of power and responsibility on his hands. He just didn't want to make the wrong mistake."

Mr. Richard is caught off guard that I respond. Actually, I'm fairly caught off guard that I had an answer to the question. This might be a good day after all.

"Well, let me pose a challenge to your comic book philosophy, Ben," Mr. Richard says. There's a growing smirk across his face. Maybe this won't be such a good day after all. "Many people argue that, because of their emergence as a superpower, Roosevelt and the U.S. should have required them to have taken action sooner than later—that the government's passivity resulted in Hitler gaining more and more power and oppressing more and more people. So, with great power comes the responsibility of policing the world."

Yup, definitely not going to be a good day. "But he didn't know for sure. I guess hindsight's twenty-twenty, right?"

"Not bad, Ben," he smiles. "I will ask that you put your drawings away, though, and focus on your notes."

Can I just get one kind of response as to what kind of day this is going to be? This back and forth is about to drive me crazy. Thankfully, the rest of the class passes with very little excitement. When the bell rings, I start packing my stuff up.

"Hey," a voice behind me says—a female voice. It doesn't take a Spidey-sense to know who it is. It's Candace Bennett. " I think you kinda caught Mr. Richard off guard."

I scratch the back of my head. I feel the sweat starting to accumulate on the back of my neck. "Yeah, I kinda caught my self off guard, too." I run out of things to say here. After a few false starts I manage to say, "Well, I guess I'll see you later." I then proceed to find my way to the nearest bathroom and take a good, deep breath from my inhaler. Yeah, it's bad enough to have the glasses and acne, the real insult is the asthma. It could be worse, though. I could have wet myself.

Lunch comes before I know it. I find a small table in the corner

of the library to eat. I'm not supposed to have food in here, but few people ever wander into the poetry section this time of the day, so it's never been a problem. Along with my sandwich I pull Chuck's copies of Spider-Man from my bag.

I'm so lost in the story I don't even see the three seniors standing over me. Only when their shadows fall over the pages do I realize that I'm in deep shit. I look up only to come face to face with Tripp Gibson and two linemen from the football team. If this was a comic book, it would be the cliffhanger ending that would carry over to the next issue. The artwork and story would be so awesome that there would probably be a subsequent two month delay on the issue. It would be worth it though. If it were a comic book.

I can't even buy myself five seconds.

"What'cha reading?" Tripp says, a tinge of sarcasm in his voice.

"Looks like spaz boy's reading his comic books," adds one of the football players. "Lemme have a look at it." He grabs the book from my hands and tears it in two. "Aww, my bad, dude. Didn't mean to tear it in half...or again...or again."

"Hey, those aren't mine," I finally manage to say something. It'll only get me into more trouble.

"Well, you should probably take better care of them then," says the other guy.

Tripp grabs my back page and takes the rest of the books out of my backpack. One by one they tear them in half. Page by page is shredded into bits of confetti they drop on my head. To finish it all off, they grab the bottle of soda next to me and pour it on my pants.

"Aww, did little baby wet his pants," Tripp smiles as the last bit of soda falls. "Nerd boy may wanna get a diaper." They turn to go, only two steps later to stop. "By the way, what did I say about you talking to my girlfriend?"

I don't answer, even though I know the answer he wants.

"Pimpled-faced geeks like you don't talk to her. Got it?"

I feel the tears well up in my eyes. For God's sake, Ben, don't start crying. The hero never cries. The hero never cries. If this was a comic book, our weak protagonist would transform into a raging green hulk and tear the bad guys apart piece by piece. Nothing happens here. Nothing happens in the real world. "Don't make me remind you of that again. Stupid comic books." Tripp grunts. Then they're gone.

Like I said, no one hangs out in the poetry section of the library at lunch. Just me. Everyone knows that. Ben, the comic book geek

who doesn't have any friends, spends every day at lunch sitting in the dark corner of the library with his comic books.

I don't wait. I don't think. I just run out of school as fast as I can ignoring that the day's only half over. The bus that goes across town just happens to be rolling up to the stop and I so get on. I have to apologize to Chuck about his comic books. I have to say I'm sorry, that I should have done something about it. I just have to get away.

Half an hour later and I make my way into the store. The bell above the door rings and Chuck looks up from the computer screen behind the counter.

"Jesus Christ, it's not three thirty already, is it?"

That's when I start crying, like a big stupid baby I start crying. Thank goodness there's no one else in the story.

"Ben, what's wrong, guy? I mean, is there something I can do?"

"I'm really sorry about your comic books, Chuck," I say in between deep gasps for air. I'm not even sure if I'm making sense. "They took 'em and tore 'em up and there wasn't anything that I could do about it. I'm really sorry, Chuck."

"Whoa, fella, who did what?"

"This guy and football buddies cornered me in the library and took your comics and tore them up, I'm really sorry."

"Take it easy, Ben. They're just pieces of paper. Do you have your inhaler?"

I'm still trying to catch my breath. He reaches in the front pocket of my backpack and pulls it out. "Here, take a deep breath." I do. Slowly, my mind begins to slow down and I realize that I've probably made a complete idiot out of myself.

Chuck picks me up from the ground. "Let's go for a walk," he says while turning the sign on the door from open to closed.

"You can't close the store. It's nothing," I reply.

"Don't sweat it. Thursday's like the Phantom Zone of comics day. No one'll be in for at least another two hours, okay?"

We walk down the street to a diner. Chuck orders a burger and fries, he encourages me to do the same. When I don't respond he says, "The kid'll have the same."

I look up from the placemat. "Thanks, Chuck."

"They're just comic books, Ben. Don't sweat it. They really weren't even good issues at all. It'll just make more room in the store."

"I'm really sorry."

"I know. You've said that like two hundred times in the past ten

minutes. Aren't you gonna be in trouble for not being in school?"

"Probably."

"Well, no use in going back now. What's done is done."

We each finish our burgers and Chuck pays the bill. I don't say another word about what happened at school and Chuck doesn't ask. He knows if I wanted to talk about it that I would. I don't.

When we get back to the store Chuck notices a message on the answering machine. He looks at me and asks, "I wonder if that's about you."

"Remember what I said about a crap-load of trouble?" I can't help but smile. I haven't smiled in a long time. "That's what I'm about to be in."

Chuck presses the button on the machine. "Hello? Hello? Is anyone there? Well, this is Ben's mother, Beverly and I was wondering if he was there. I know he hangs out at your store and I got a call from the counselor at school saying he didn't show up for his class after lunch. Well, if you happen to see him tell him to call me immediately and to go straight home. He's in a crap-load of trouble."

"What'd I tell you," I say. "I guess I'd better call my mom"

Chuck hands me his phone and I dial the number.

"Where the hell are you?" she asks.

"I'm at the comic shop."

"And why aren't you at school?"

"I...uh..." A good answer doesn't come. "I just didn't feel like being at school today.

"Well, you had better get your butt home and not move until I get there. You are in...so...much...trouble."

"Yes, ma'am."

Mom walks through the door of the apartment at five thirty. By the look on her face, I can tell she's been planning this conversation all afternoon. She's been crying, too. Her mascara's all messed up. I've really screwed up this time. I'm such an idiot.

"Why did you leave school today?" She doesn't even say hello. "What on earth made you think that was a good idea?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"Why, Ben, why do you always say that? Look, I know I don't always know how to relate to you, but I'm damn well doing my best. If something's going on, you have to let me help you out."

"There's nothing you can do, mom. These guys cornered me in

the library today and tore up my comic books. Okay?"

"Did you tell the librarian or a teacher?"

"Yeah, that would have worked out great. One: I'd be a nark. Two: I'd be dead meat the next time they found me alone."

"Well, we'll discuss this with Mr. Yates, the guidance counselor tomorrow. They've asked that you and I come in tomorrow morning to talk with them about what's been bothering you lately."

"Please, Mom. Please, don't make me do that," I don't hold back. "I get made fun of enough. I'm fine with being the comic book geek, but don't make me become the kid with mental problems too."

"Ben, I'm at the end of my rope here. I don't know what to do with you, and Mr. Yates might have some suggestions."

"Do whatever. It's what you always do." I get up from the couch and go to my room. I don't leave it until the next morning. I grab the box of comic books from under my bed and read issue by issue until I fall asleep under a pile of paper pages and plastic bags.

* * *

"Mrs. Bridges thanks for coming in this morning. I don't think this will take too long," Mr. Yates says from behind his desk. He looks like every guidance counselor I've ever had to sit in front of. Like every other day of the week he's wearing a short-sleeve dress shirt with a tie. He's going bald, but he still wants to make a difference with the kids. I hope I never have a job like that.

"Let me just say, Mr. Yates, that what Ben did yesterday was completely unacceptable. He should not have left school."

Mr. Yates shifts in his chair and turns toward me. "Ben, why did you cut in the middle of the day?"

"I just didn't want to be here, that's all."

"Ben," my mom interrupts in a rough voice.

"Would this have anything to do with three football players cornering you in the library yesterday?" That gets both of our attention.

"Candace Bennett came to my office yesterday afternoon and told me about it. She said Tripp had been bragging to some friends about it and she overheard him. What she did was the right thing. I wish you would have come and told me about this."

"It's nothing, really. I mean, I'm fine."

"This is not acceptable behavior. Tripp has been going through some things lately that may account for his behavior—not that it excuses it. However, I'm not able to say anything else on the subject. Trust me, he's being dealt with on this issue and the comic books he and his

friends destroyed will be paid for. You have my word on that."

"Thanks." I don't look up. This is only going to lead to bigger problems later.

"Ben," Mr. Yates clears his throat. He sounds unsure of what he's about to say next, a complete reversal of his earlier tone. "I have a favor to ask of you. It's something that I think you're perfect for. If you're willing to assist me with this, I'm sure we'll be able to look the other way on yesterday's truancy."

"He's listening," my mother interjects.

"What is it?" I sound less than enthusiastic.

"Well, Ben. I'm involved with the Wish Fulfillment program in our town. We help grant wishes for terminally ill kids. It's been brought to my attention that there's a little boy who wants nothing more than to meet Spider-Man."

I interrupt, "Yeah, me too. What's your point?" At least he has my attention.

"Well, I'm a bit of a comic book fan myself. I was always more of a Batman person myself, but from what I remember, the best Spider-Man and the one of the movies is a teenager. Is that right?"

"Yeah, he's..."

"About sixteen." Mr. Yates cuts me off.

"The foundation has purchased a studio quality suit for this project. Now all we need is a Spider-Man to wear it. I thought you might be interested."

The air leaves the room. Every thought in my head stops and I don't know what to say. Mr. Yates' little speech has even caught my mom off guard.

"You're under no obligation to do this Ben," Mr. Yates breaks the silence. "It's just, well, something I thought you might like to..."

"I'll do it. I'd love to."

Mr. Yates smiles. My mom smiles. Heck, even I smile. "Good, I just knew you would. If you'll just meet us at St. Francis Memorial on Saturday morning, then we'll set you up." He takes a deep breath. "Well, I think we're done here. What do ya say? Mrs. Bridges, I thank you for coming in this morning. You have a great kid on your hands."

"Yeah, he can surprise you."

I can't help but replay the whole thing through my mind. Here I was thinking that I was gonna be grounded for the next three years and it turns out I get the chance to be Spider-freakin'-Man. I spend the rest of the day thinking about what I'm going to say...what I'm gonna do. I

actually eat lunch in the cafeteria. I mean, I sit alone, but I'm just so pumped up that I don't even care.

As soon as the final bell rings I take the bus across town to tell Chuck the news. "That's great," Chuck replies. "I mean, I'd love to do it myself but..." He trails off as both hands grab a fist full of fat around his midsection. "But you, man, you've got the build and everything. You're a regular Peter Parker. What're ya gonna say?"

"I don't know. Something heroic I guess."

"Sounds like a plan, but what *exactly* are you gonna say?"

"I'll figure something out."

"Well, feel free to go through the back issues and pull whatever you need for inspiration."

"Cool, Chuck. I really appreciate it."

"Just consider me your trusty sidekick."

"You look more like the Kingpin." We both laugh at that one.

Saturday morning doesn't come soon enough. Mr. Yates dropped off the suit that morning. I had to invite Chuck over to see it. For the longest time we stand there and stare at the closed box on the dining room table.

"You gonna open it?" Chuck inquires.

"In a minute. I wanna build up suspense," I say.

Chuck doesn't wait, he tears the package open flinging paper all over the dining room. "There. Suspense over."

I remove the cardboard top from the box and we both take in a deep breath. "Oh...my...god."

"Would you look at that?" Chuck says. His eyes look to be about the size of dinner plates. "It's just like the one from the movie."

"Wow."

"Wow."

"I guess I should try it on." I take the suit to my room and put it on. It's tight, much more tight than I imagined it would be. But hey, it's spandex and that's what superheroes wear.

Boots.

Check.

Gloves.

Check.

That leaves only one more thing. The mask. It's what separates the secret identity of our mild-mannered protagonist from the hero. The mask is everything. It's what makes the hero.

"You plan on coming out any time soon, or do you and the suit want a moment?" Chuck says while banging on the door.

I take a deep breath and open the door.

"Oh my Stan Lee!" Chuck gasps. "It's perfect. You're freaking Spider-Man."

"It kinda rides up the crotch, though."

"It's spandex, comes with the territory."

"That's what I thought."

"I mean, geez, I mean...geez."

"Yeah, it's pretty awesome. It's every fanboy's dream."

"Well, mild mannered Ben Bridges-slash-Peter Parker, better put your regular clothes on over it and we'll head to the hospital. I put jeans and a t-shirt on over the suit and store the gloves in my coat.

"Uh, Ben," Chuck says. "You might wanna take the mask off."

"Oh, I completely forgot. I bet that's gotta be a problem for Spider-Man."

"If he was real."

"Touché."

Mr. Yates meets us at the entrance to the hospital. Same short sleeved shirt. Same tie. However, he looks so excited today. It could be meeting Spider-Man is his dream come true, too.

"This is Chuck, he runs the comic shop on Broadway."

"Charles Jenkins," Mr. Yates extends his hand, "I haven't seen you since you graduated."

"Uh..hey." Chuck shakes his hand. I forget that Chuck doesn't get out much. It's a Saturday—the second busiest day of the week for sales—and he closed the shop. This was that important to him.

"Okay, Ben. We're gonna take you up to the intensive care unit and you'll be able to go in. Uh, Charles, I mean, Chuck, you'll have to wait in the lobby."

"No problemo, but did you say he's gonna walk in?" Chuck inquires.

"Yeah, Spider-Man wouldn't just waltz into a room. He'd come in through the window"

"Well, Mr. Bridges, in case you forgot, you're not really Spider-Man."

"But this kid wants to meet Spider-Man. The REAL Spider-Man. Right?"

"Let me speak to someone in custodial and see what we can do."

Mr. Yates walks away for about fifteen minutes. When he returns, three janitors are carrying the biggest ladder I've ever seen in my life. "You want the window," Mr. Yates smiles, "You've got your ticket through the window."

"Won't he hear the ladder hit the wall?" I ask.

"Actually, the doctors are running some test on him right now. The nurses' station is supposed to give me the all clear when he's back and they're ready for you."

"Looks like it's the window," Chuck says. "All right, Peter Parker, time to become Spider-Man."

This is the moment I've been waiting for all my life—to be a real superhero. We're standing at the side of the hospital, waiting for the phone call to come. And then Mr. Yates' phone rings. The only thing that keeps my stomach from tying itself up in knots is the fact that his ringtone is the "Mexican Hat Dance."

Mr. Yates places his hand my shoulder, "The young man's name is Shane. He's eight."

"Uh, Mr. Yates. How long does he have to live?"

"Well, Ben, the doctors aren't sure, but it's probably less than a month. Shane's been sick most of his life. It hasn't been easy on his mom and dad or on his big brother. It's hard to watch a loved one go."

Mr. Yates' words hit me square in the stomach. I've been so stupid lately about my parent's divorce. At least I still have them. At least they still have me. I should probably stop being such a punk.

"You ready, Ben?" Chuck snaps be back.

"Let's do this."

It's a fairly windy day today and climbing a ladder four stories wasn't what I had in mind on the ride over, but it's what Spider-Man would do. Well, he wouldn't climb a ladder—he climb a wall or swing in on a web, but you get the point. Shane wants to meet Spider-Man and if I have anything to do about it, he will. The three janitors have the ladder held pretty steady. I'm still scared to death. Perhaps that's not the best choice of words in this situation. Chuck shouts from the ground, "Excelsior!" I give him a thumbs up from eight stories above the ground. I stop just short of the window to collect my thoughts.

Here's goes everything, Ben. Open the book to the splash page. The Stupendous Spider-Man #1 with story and pencils by Ben Bridges. I say a little prayer and wonder if Spider-Man would do the same thing before every big moment, "Please don't let me screw this up."

I knock on the window to the room, and a doctor opens it up. I

can't see into the room just yet—it's kind of dark inside, but I start my performance. "Nothing to worry about citizens, just your friendly neighborhood Spider-Man."

An older woman, in her early forties looks up from the side of the bed. Her face is grave and she's pale. Not a sickly pale, but the kind of color that comes from staying inside a hospital room for the past year or two. Her hand is gripped to Shane's. She collects herself and says, "Shane, look, you have a visitor."

The first sound he makes isn't a squeal of excitement; instead, he coughs a deep rattling cough. It's a sound that shouldn't come from a body as small as his. Shane's eight. He should be bigger than he is. He shouldn't be in a hospital bed. His mother grabs the remote for the bed and raises him up so that he can see me.

"Spider-Man!" Shane finally manages, "I knew you'd come and see me."

I walk across the room toward his bed. "Well, I ran into some trouble with the Green Goblin along the way, but I wouldn't miss meeting you for all the web in the world."

"Wow, your suit is so awesome!"

"Thanks. You can't fight crime in your pajamas."

Shane starts coughing again. "When...I...get out of the...hospital, I'm gonna start training to be a superhero, too. Then we can fight crime together."

"For now, though, I need you here." I say. "Doctor Octopus might be lurking around. This is a hospital and he's a doctor after all."

"The doctors here all are really cool and nice," Shane says. "They're the good guys. If I don't become a superhero like you, I want to be a doctor like Doctor Mike. He's the best."

It was apparently Dr. Mike who opened the window for me. "I don't know," he says, "being a doctor is great 'cause you get to help good kids like you, but I'd probably stick with being a superhero."

"Yeah," Shane says in between coughs, "I think I'd rather be a hero."

"Well, Shane," I say, "doctors are heroes, too. They don't have superpowers and they can't swing from building on a web like me, but they do really great things for people who need them."

Dr. Mike steps closer, "We just do what we can."

Shane tells me all his favorite Spider-Man adventures and recounts them detail by detail. He gets a lot of the facts mixed up, some of the characters I think he's making up. However, when talking about

this world of comic books and moral absolutes and heroes always winning out over villains, he has the life and vibrancy of the most energetic eight-year-old out there.

"Hey mom," a voice comes through the door. "I was wondering if..." That's when he sees me—even before I see him. My biggest enemy. Not Spider-Man's biggest enemy, but Ben Bridges'.

Tripp Gibson.

No wonder he's been such a jerk lately. His little brother's dying and he can't stop it. Not even Spider-Man can save the day.

"And who is this?" I ask Shane.

"This is my brother, Tripp. He gave me all his comic books. That's where I first read about you."

"Are you a fan of me, too, Tripp?" I ask.

"No," he mumbles. "I'm not."

"He doesn't mean that, Spider-Man," Shane defends. "He used to tell me all kinds of awesome stories about you. Now he says it's for kids."

"You're never too old to have heroes, right Tripp?"

He doesn't respond. Tripp just stands there arms folded across his chest, a somber archvillain expression scrawled across his face. If he had powers right now, I might be in trouble.

"Mom," Shane takes his mother's hand. "I'm sleepy. I'm gonna take a nap now, but I wanna tell Spider-Man bye first."

"You're a real hero, Shane. You know that, right? And when you grow up, I'll let you be my sidekick. You just get real strong and tough and I'll have a costume waiting for you, okay?"

"Thanks, Spider-Man," he says, "I'll be well again really soon. Then we'll fight the bad guys together.

Shane closes his eyes sleeps the sleep that only the innocent can. If I had to guess, he was off in a world of adventure and web slinging—a place of Technicolor costumes and comic book adventures. It's not like the real world at all.

Shane's mother begins to cry, "I can't thank you enough for doing this..." She waits for my name.

"Spider-Man."

She pauses, "Yes, Spider-Man. It's what Shane wanted more than anything else."

"You're welcome, and," I hesitate, not knowing what to say next, "I'm so sorry." That's when Shane and Tripp's mom loses it.

"If you'll excuse me...Spider-Man..." She runs out of the room.

"Why did you have to go and do that?" Tripp shouts, "Give him hope like that?"

"That's what heroes do, Tripp. They give people hope when everything seems hopeless. What would life be like if we didn't have something bigger to believe in—to aspire to? Otherwise, we're all just kids in the corner of library eating lunch alone."

"What did you say?" It catches Tripp off guard.

"Is that why you hate comic books so much? Because it's something that he loves? Why lose both of them? Is it too much to ask to enjoy a world that's not filled with loss and sadness like ours? For a brief time to be able to fight villains and crawl up walls?"

"It's not the real world though."

"It should be."

"But it isn't,"

"For Shane, though, it is. And it once was for you, too." My mouth goes dry and I know my job here is done. "I have to go."

Tripp's head falls against his chest. He's been holding everything inside for years now and he just can't hold it in any more. "He's got less than a month, you know."

I place my hand on his shoulder. "I know, it'll be over soon. And then, he'll be in a place with only heroes, but for now you be his hero. You stand by his side and help fight his villains. You're his brother and with that great power..."

"... comes great responsibility. I know."

"Then prove it."

I raise the window and am about half-way out of it before Tripp speaks again. "Ben," he stops "I didn't mean to, well..."

"Don't worry about it."

If this were a comic book, I'd raise my wrist to the sky and soar off on a web and continue to the fight the forces of evil in a never-ending battle. Shane's name would probably never show up in the stories that were printed month after month after month until some editor decided to cancel the title. The only people who'd ever care that this happened would be fanboys so steeped in the continuity of Ben Bridges that even a minor character who graced a single issue wouldn't escape their notice.

Maybe not.

Maybe this was a moment that someone years ago put in for a reason—a minor situation that turns out to be changing in the life of the hero. Maybe this is the moment where the hero learns that the costume

isn't the real identity. Instead, it's the person underneath who keeps on fighting.

The Ladies Literary Club Fiction Award was first presented in 1983. Sponsored by a local organization, this award is represented in the retrospective by Robert St. John (1985), Alicia Neat (1986), Rebecca J. Carter (1987), Allison Thorpe (1990), Christopher Bratton (1993), Janay Crabtree (1996), Kevin Blankenship (1998), and Alex Taylor (2001).

Ben Davis **untitled**

Great Grand
Evan Mulliken

and i want the dirt to warm my hands
through the cold brushes past my jacket and gloves
i want the dirt to fill my pockets
the breath from her lungs is worth more
and i want the dirt to cover my face
pebbles missing from the graveyard
pushing the dirt over my feet
i'm standing by her casket wondering
would the dirt pin me to the ground
and i'm pressing my face into the rain
and i know the dirt feel exposed, too
the grass is missing and mud is forming
i want the dirt to cake over my laces
and the rabbi says, *shma y'sroel*
and the dirt i shovel into the grave
spends time pressed against a cement slab
and i want the dirt to warm my hands
so i don't feel the burn in my fingers

A Verse I Can't Remember
L. Christian Parrish

We were a picture beneath
the tree… backs bent.
There was little light and
an old string in my thumb
where a break had been.
I sang songs while birds
flapped around as thoughts
in my head—
then, Jesus spoke to me.
He said he was afraid of the
Trinity like any man might be.
We joked about the idea of
selfishness when there are three.

The leaves all fell on the same
side like trick quarters, no matter
their color, no matter Frost's "Design."
In that brief brightness it was clear to me:
I talked for months like a drunk
(sometimes drunk)
claiming my own religion with nothing
to preach about but my faith in what
I had forgot—writing about it in
the margins to remind myself in case
there were questions.

Edward Linsmier **untitled**

Voices and *Zephyrus* Retrospective

1956

Gallows

Robert B. Matheny

Steel doors and white-washed walls age-yellowed encase a room. Six rows of chairs, six in each row, stand, staunch, upright sentries bolted to the steel strips down the rows. Each chair seat was a metallic color, dulled from long use. Facing the chairs, at the head of the room stood the gallows.

The single ceiling lamp glowed dim. The gloom fashioned eerie shadows and the one of prominence was behind the gallows. A marionette hanging loose, his act over, waited for the next.

On the gallows was a marionette of this life; his act done forever. He hung there like a wet mop, head tilted forward, arms a rubber limpness, feet together, toes of prison slippers pointed down to his eternal doom. The grim determined rope that encased his neck was held by eight loops that formed the hangman's knot. From the small of his neck to a stout oak beam extended upward five feet of half-inch rope. The gallows formed a big inverted U of twelve-by-twelve oak timbers. They were black in the gloom: they had seen; they had punished many men's sins. This framework stood in the shadow upon the wall framing the marionette. That suspenseful, heart-tightening, and cornered feeling that edges desperation made me wonder, "What if I were on the gallows?"

His First

James Atchison

SCENE I

Jemmerson, a youthful employee of Lindon Seaways and nephew to the owner, has many difficulties making office matters come out right. On this particular day, he has been unusually pressed with extra work and strain. A tourist jumped from the office window the previous day, and Jemmerson's expectant wife is in the hospital. He has been called from the busy office to the hospital.

SCENE II

(The curtain rises on a spick and span hospital room where Faye Jemmerson is a very young and child-like patient. On the dresser is a package wrapped in brown paper.)

JEM: (Rushing in breathlessly with a package wrapped in green paper, identical in size with the one on the bureau.) Oh, my Faye, my little wife, my darling, I came as quick as I could, I . .

FAY: (Interrupting.) Jem. . . . .

JEM: (Butting in.) Now don't get alarmed, sweet, just take it easy. Be calm. . . . .

FAY: Jem. . (Trying again.)

JEM: That's right, be calm. I know that in a crisis of this kind, I have to be calm. And I want you to be calm. (Excited.) When I went to the office this morning, That's what I told them. I said I'm the perfect father; I remain calm at all times.

FAY: Jem, darling. . . .

JEM: Now, Faye, don't go worrying about the office. I've got everything taken care of. Mrs. Morris, you know she couldn't work if she couldn't depend on me.

FAY: Why? (Pronounce 'Y.')

JEM: This bundle is for her. Before I could come see my wife, my own wife, I had to stop at the cleaners and pick up a flag.

FAY: A flag?

JEM: Yes, Hager wanted it clean for the exposition next week. (Puts it next to other package.)

FAY: Now. . . .

JEM: You don't have to worry about a thing, not a thing, just rest, just be calm.

FAY: I know, but Jem. . . . .

JEM: Of course, it was hard to get away from the office at a busy time of day like this. But, dear, for you I would sacrifice anything. I would do anything for you. That's the reason I rushed right over here. That is precisely the reason. I knew you'd need me.

FAY: I do need you, Jem. . .

JEM: I know you do, dear, and everything's going to be all right. Let me just tell you how I left things in the office. Why, that Mr. Hager was in a stew before I got his routine correspondence and telephoning done. I can't understand that Mr. Hager.

FAY: Can't understand?

JEM: No, you see, he's been working there lots longer than I, yet, you know what he does, he asks me where files and stuff like that are.

FAY: Maybe I. . . . .

JEM: Maybe he's been there too long, I can't understand it.

FAY: Jem, I. . . . .

JEM: And that new secretary, honey, she's a scream. She's typical of what the new business schools are putting out these days.

FAY: I mean. . . . .

JEM: No, I don't mean that she's struck on me, but she tries to tell me how to run my business, imagine that!

FAY: Well, but. . . . .

JEM: Well, you should see her, you should have seen her when I told her off. She just . . . Well, I just put her in her place. No use letting them get the upper hand.

FAY: Jem, I must. . . . .

JEM: You must be calm. Just like I said, "Take it easy," no cause for alarm.

FAY: I've had. . . . .

JEM: I know you've had a hard time, and I know that it's hard on you having a baby, but you do just like I say, and everything will be all right.

FAY: Darling, I must tell you. . . .

JEM: Tell me what, dear?

FAY: That I'm a mother.

JEM: I know (but he doesn't believe her), I know, I'm a father. Now, now, you're just excited. Maybe you'd better call the nurse. Maybe I'd better call the nurse.

FAY: No, Jem.

JEM: No, you haven't had the baby.
FAY: No, don't call the nurse.
JEM: No?
FAY: I mean yes, it's all over.
JEM: Now, now, it's not all over. It will be all right. You just have to be patient.
NUR: Yes, Mrs. Jemmerson?
FAY: My husband. Dear, this is Miss Kirkpatrick.
NUR: How do you do?
JEM: Glad to know you, ma'am.
NUR: Did you wish to show Mr. Jemmerson your. . . .
FAY: Yes, please.
JEM: Now I'll be right here, Faye. I'll take care of everything. You have nothing to worry about. (Looks at watch.) (Under his breath.) I wonder if they need me at the office. (Aloud.) I'll stay with you, dear.
FAY: I know, darling.
(Nurse comes in with a little bundle in her arms.)
JEM: Huh, such a red little thing.
FAY: But he's ours, dear.
JEM: (Looks quickly at his watch.) It is a baby.
(Another nurse comes in with bundle; stands by bed.)
JEM: Just like the other one, little and red.
FAY: All babies are, dear.
JEM: My baby will be different.
(Another nurse comes in with bundle stands by first or second nurse.)
JEM: So many samples. (Looks quickly at his watch.)
(Another nurse comes in with bundle, stands by other nurses.)
JEM: (With pointing finger counts.) Four. Four little red babies in my wife's room. Is that supposed to help her have mine?
(Another nurse comes in with bundle; stands by other nurses.)
JEM: (To Faye.) Don't they know that I am busy? (Pointing to nurses.) Do they know that I work at Lindon Seaways and can't come to see all the babies in the hospital?
FAY: (Interrupting quickly.) Darling. . . .
JEM: (Interrupting more quickly.) When you get your baby, when our baby comes, (Looks at watch.) I'll come back. (Reaches for flag.)
FAY: Jem, darling, these (Pointing to babies.) are our babies.
JEM: Our?

FAY: (Interrupting him.) Yes, Jem, these are our babies.
JEM: (Sprawls to the floor. Four nurses rush out in a dither, the head nurse, calmly takes a water glass and bathes his face.)
FAY: Jem, darling, are you all right?
INTERN: (Beckoned by four nurses hysterical with laughter. He enters and goes to Faye, not Jem.) Don't worry, Mrs. Jemmerson, this is the usual procedure for the father of quintuplets.

SCENE III

With great flourish and jubilance, Jemmerson returns to the office expecting to be congratulated, but instead finds his mix-ups and errors are catching up with him. The excitement and confusion mount as he contemplates the responsibility of quintuplets and the possible loss of his job.

1957

A Child's Prayer

John Boyd

Dear God———
Thank you for everything,
specially my puppy.
I love the presents you
give little children:
the pretty sounds,
the good smells,
and specially colors.
Is heaven blue?
My home is green
and has grasshoppers.
Amen.

The Boil

Noel Coppage

Danny, who was eleven and in the fifth grade, sat in his hard wood seat near the window and squirmed and tried to look out the window at the same time. Danny always squirmed near the end of the school day, but now he had a special reason. He had a boil on his hip; at least that was what his mother said it was. He could not see it, but he could feel it. It felt like a boil all right. He knew one thing—it sure made sitting uncomfortable. He had to sit sideways and cross his legs but that made his legs cramp, or he could slide very far down in the seat till he was almost reclining on his backbone, but that made the back of his neck hurt. So he alternated between the two positions, making the changes often enough so that the cramps did not have time to set in. In this manner he had gotten through the past few days with a minimum of discomfort although the frequent frowns aimed in his direction by Miss Fern told him that this sort of thing could not go on too much longer.

Well, that was all right with him. It would end tonight. His mother had said that the boil would be ready to open by tonight and she would take a needle and open it and squeeze it and then wipe it off with a clean white cloth and paint it good with Mercurochrome and he would sleep on his stomach tonight and it would be all right tomorrow. His mother had promised not to hurt, but Danny knew it would hurt when she started squeezing. He had had boils before; so he knew that. He could not see this one, though, and that was good. He wondered if it was as big as it felt.

Then the bell rang and Miss Fern, as was her custom, tried to look twice as stern and demand twice as much order in filing out of the classroom as she had all during the day. However, the children realized that they were free once more and, as was their custom, raised bedlam as they scrambled for the door. Danny was joined by Danny Fulks, who was also eleven, but was six months older than Danny, and who needed a haircut. The two boys lived on the same street and were very good friends. They walked out the front entrance of the school and, taking a dare from a third boy, jumped over the hedge and ran down on the lawn, which was forbidden territory. Then they scampered across the grass and reached the sidewalk just as Miss Pooley, who was the principal, poked her hawk nose out the front door to see if all was well.

The boys walked along, not talking, and Danny kicked a tin can

ahead of him. Bobby walked with his head down, his hands thrust deep into his pockets, and did not attempt to join the sport. Finally the can curved and rolled into the street and Danny gave it up and walked as if in deep thought.

"Mama's going to open my boil tonight," he said.

Bobby continued as he had been except the black fore-lock, which made up a great portion of his hair, slid down over his eyes. They were very sad eyes. Obviously, something was troubling him and this troubled Danny, because, when Bobby was troubled, he was no fun.

"You're not worried about us getting on the lawn, are you?" Danny asked. "Old hawk nose didn't see us."

"No," Bobby said. Then, suddenly: "Danny, I'm not going home."

"I am. Mama's going to open the boil."

"I'm not ever going home again. I'm going to run away."

"Oh, come on. Don't start THAT again!"

"I'm really going, this time," Bobby said and Danny saw that he was going to cry. This had come up before. Danny was the only one that knew—except maybe his mother, whom he had told about it—what Bobby had gone through. Bobby's father was always away, and when he did come home, he and Bobby's mother quarreled viciously.

"Last night," Bobby said, "he hit me with his fist. Here—look here." He showed his jaw to Danny and Danny could make out a large blue spot that extended from the boy's ear down to his mouth. He also noticed the tears which were beginning to flow down the boy's cheeks. Bobby always cried silently, which made Danny sadder than anything he knew.

"And SHE was drunk," Bobby said. And he cried sobs that shook his whole body and choked off his last words.

"Listen. Come to my house," Danny said. "Tomorrow is Friday and you can stay tonight and tomorrow night; and Saturday maybe Dad will take us fishing."

"No. I'm going away, today. They don't want me. I can't stand it no more."

"Don't you want to go fishing with us?"

"It's not the same," Bobby said. "It's not the same. You don't know how it is. You don't have to go fishing with someone else's daddy."

They had walked past the drugstore, past the barber shop, past the beauty salon, and now they were nearing the turn-off corner that led

them home.

"There's the street up ahead," Danny said.

"I'm going straight on," Bobby said. "I'm going across the bridge and across the farms and they will never see me again."

"Are you really going to do it?"

"Yes."

"How will you live? What will you eat?"

"I don't know. I don't care. Nobody cares."

Danny started to say "I care," but then a plan began to work itself into his mind and he said, "You're sure getting selfish these days, Bobby Fulks."

"What do you mean by that?"

"All you think about is yourself and getting away from home. You never think about other people."

"What other people?"

"Me. That's what other people. It would be fine for you, running away from everything. But what about me? You're the only friend I've got. What do you think I'd do if you left? Me, with only a five-year-old baby sister for a friend."

"You'd still have your dad," Bobby said bitterly.

"Yes, after six and on week-ends. But what about through the week? What about that?"

"Aw. . . . you don't need me," Bobby said, but Danny could tell he was winning the battle. They had reached the turn-off and he had stopped at the corner while they talked.

"Well, how about it?" Danny asked. You going to leave your friends? Just like that? Because I need you to—"

"What? What do you need me for?"

Danny's eyes narrowed. "Well," he said, confidentially, "I got this boil, you know, and Mama's supposed to open it tonight. Only—well, I don't know whether she can do the job or not. Now, if you could kind of, you know, help her."

"Well—"

"It's her eyesight I'm afraid of," Danny said. "After all she's thirty-four years old, you know."

"Well—"

"Come on, we'll be late for supper."

Ten minutes later the two boys were seated at the table and Danny's mother was serving them roast beef gravy. They ate heartily and Danny, despite his one-sided sitting position, enjoyed the meal thor-

oughly. Bobby ate in silence and, from time to time, came close to tears which he covered up in advance by pretending to wipe his face with his napkin.

Later, Danny was in the living room with his mother, preparing the tools for the boil opening (which was a great ritual with him) while Bobby was in the play-room looking through Danny's enormous collection of comic books.

"Did you see the blue spot?" Danny asked his mother.

"Yes," she said, and looked very sad.

"You've got to let him help you open the boil, Mama. He was going to run away—really this time, and it was all I could do—."

"I understand, darling," she said and put her arms around him and held him very tightly for a long time.

"And ask Dad, when he comes in, if he'll take us fishing Saturday. O.K. Mama?"

"Yes," she said, and held him again. Danny could hear his friend in the play-room, his sniffles mingling with the sound of rustling comic book leaves. And Danny felt very lucky and very sad and a little more grown-up.

1958

Yesterday?

Walter Langsford

Her footsteps dappled the virgin white
As she walked along the snow-covered path
To the old well, and there with thoughts
Of years gone by, sat down upon a wooden bench
And brushed away, with gloved hand, the snow
And read aloud the words, "I love you."

1958

Laborer's Vesper Hymn

Jim Skaggs

Twilight ascends into the heavens
As they glorify the Creator
With a luminous magnificence—
Divine, majestic, ethereal,
Glancing earthward we behold a weary worker—
Molding clay in the Potter's Hand—
Coming home from a day of toil and labor:
He treads slowly, heavily the path to his abode,
Entering, he smiles upon small faces radiant
with joy,
Sitting before his table
Where the bounty of harvest is spread,
He gives the Maker thanks.

1959

The White Marble

Sue Grafton Flood

Anna sat in the middle of the asphalt circle that marked the dead end of the Lincoln Heights subdivision humming to herself while she took her chalk and drew a rather absurd ring around her four marbles. This was called Playing Marbles and was what her mother had told her to do. Her mother told her to do this quite often. "Anna, why don't you go outside and play marbles?" she would say. "Mother has a headache." Anna didn't understand what the relationship between headaches and marbles meant, but her mother seemed to think it would cure most anything and her mother was a "big person" and therefore very wise in Anna's mind. Sometimes she would say, "Anna, why don't you go outside and skate? Mother wants to take a nap," or sometimes she just said, "Why don't you run along?" This was the hardest thing for Anna to do because she never new just how far she was supposed to run or how long or when she was supposed to stop. "Running Along" was not a good game at all. "Playing Marbles" was much more fun. Today she was making fairy circles. She had four marbles. One was blue and looked like one of Baby John's eyes all fallen out of his face. Sometimes when she was mad at Baby John she would step on the marble and then creep back into the house to find him, half-afraid, half-hoping that one of his little eyes would be gone. The second marble was red. It was the color of the lipstick she would wear when she got "big." Mother wore some now and Anna liked for her to kiss her hard so that Mother's lips would leave a mark on her cheek. Then people would know that Mother kissed her. Another marble was green and looked like seaweed in the bottom of the ocean. Anna liked the ocean. She had been there once when she was "little" only they had called it "lake." She wondered where Lake Ocean was. She would like to go back there someday because Baby John had not been there. She wondered why Mother and Daddy had gotten Baby John, but she guessed that it was because they just had gotten tired of having her all the time. She was a girl and she had heard them say how much they wanted the other kind. The last marble was white. There was nothing else on it and it was her favorite. She had never seen anything that was as white or as round or as beautiful as that white marble. Mother would sometimes say, "Anna, let Baby John play with your marbles. Don't be a selfish girl." And Anna would give Baby John the red marble and the blue one and the

green one. But she never let him have her white marble. She would never let him look at it or touch it or hold it, even for a minute, and she knew that if this was being "selfish," that she would always be that way.

Anna was crouched down on her heels with her bony, downy five-year-old legs stuck out on either side of her dress like a grasshopper. She would hold her marbles up to the sunlight one by one and make a wish. Then she would place it very gently in the fairy circle. She always made the same four wishes. For the blue marble she wished that there was no Baby John. For the red, she wished she that she could be "grown up" and for the green she wished that she could go back to Lake Ocean. For the white marble, she wished a very precious secret wish that was too wonderful to even whisper out loud. She always smiled when she made that wish and it was a smile of Jesus in her Sunday school book, but Anna didn't know this. She only knew that when she held the white marble up to the sun it was better than saying her "Now I lay me down to sleep."

There was a brown shoe stepping on the fairy ring. No one had ever stepped on Anna's fairy ring before. She squatted there looking at the brown shoe and then a green and brown striped sock and then a leg. And suddenly it was a little boy standing there. "Quit stepping on the fairy ring," she piped shrilly. The shoe with the little boy on the end of it scooted back. "I'm sorry," said the boy. "Oh, it's all right. You didn't know it was a magic circle," she said. "What's a magic circle?" said the boy. "I don't know. You just make a wish on a marble and when you put it in the circle it comes true." "It does not." "Does too." "Not." "Too." "I don't believe it." "Well, it does." "Who told you?" "No one." "Then how do you know it's true?" "I know it's true because I made it up myself, smartypants." This was a nasty word and Anna wished she hadn't said it. "Who are you?" she said to the boy. "My name is Neil and I'm a Jew." "I'm a girl, but I wish I wasn't." "Then why don't you wish on one of your old marbles?" "Cause I don't feel like it." She looked down at her feet and then back at the little boy. "How old are you and what's a Jew?" "I'm eight and Jews are God's chosen people." Anna looked down at her feet again and closed her eyes. "I wish I was one," she said very softly. "Well, you're not." "Will you be my friend?" "I guess so." "Then you can have one of my marbles." "Can I have the white one?" Anna was very quiet. She picked up the four marbles and held them in the palm of her hand. She stood up and looked at the boy. The four marbles glinted in the sun and the white marble had never been quite so beautiful. Anna held out her

hand and watched a grimy, pudgy hand close over the milky white glass. Then she turned around and ran home.

That night when Daddy came home Anna climbed up in his lap. Baby John usually got there first, but tonight he was flushed and cross and Mother had put him to bed. Daddy's lap was a wonderful place to sit. Anna put her arm around his neck and wiggled with pleasure. "What's gotten into you, Button?" he asked laughing at her. "I have a friend and his name is Neil and I love him and he's a Jew," she said, not knowing which was the more important. Daddy's smile faded and the laugh wrinkles around his eyes got hard. Mother said, "A Jew!" as if she wished she had something else. Mother looked at Daddy and said, "Oh Lord, what's this neighborhood coming to. First it was that nasty Italian family and now THIS!" Daddy said, "Now Catherine, there's no reason to get so upset. Anna doesn't know any better. Mother was very close to tears. "Well, she's got to know sometime. Anna, come here to Mother." Anna climbed down from her daddy's lap and went to stand before her mother. Mother tried to look very wise but she used the same voice as she did when Anna asked her where Baby John came from. "Now, dear," she said, "I know you're too little to understand, but you must never ever play with Neil again. Jews are bad people." Mother gave her a look as if there was some important secret that she was not telling her. "But Neil said that they were God's chosen people." "Neil was telling a fib. The Jews were the bad people that killed our Lord Jesus." Anna said "Oh" and went to her room. She knew that something was wrong. She knew that somebody was mixed up. Mother knew everything because Mother was a "big person" but somehow it wasn't right. Jesus was a Jew and she was supposed to love Jesus but she was not supposed to love Neil because he was a Jew. Mother said that Jews were bad but Neil was not bad. She had given Neil her white marble. She knew that she could not have given her white marble to anyone who was bad. She would have given her white marble to Jesus but he never came to play with her. Anna began to cry. She had done something that made her parents very angry with her. "I hate Jews," she said. But deep down inside Anna knew that she was very glad that she had given her white marble to Neil. And if that was being bad she knew that she would always be that way.

1959

Running

William J. Rudloff

Why do men run? Surely, in the highly mechanized society the entire world is approaching today, the only reason to run would be to catch the 5:35 interurban to Waukegan on a drizzly February evening. No, it's not quite that bad, but the dampening example does point out the all-too-true fact that running has lost a great part of its practical value to the human race.

As we all know, prehistoric man ran to escape the perils and competition of nature, savage beasts, and sometimes even more savage fellow men. This is a classic example of "survival of the fittest"; inadvertently, then, primitive man was proving the validity of the Darwinian thesis. But brushing aside our Cro-Magnon ancestors for a moment, let us return to the contemporary world. Today the human race is protected, and in some ways fettered, by the presence of practical civilization throughout most of the globe. The elements are forecasted, the savage beasts are largely extinct or in cages, and modern man does not run from his human enemies: he builds instead a radiation-proof bomb shelter for his safety.

After studying conditions in the modern world, I am sure that we must arrive at the following conclusion: Running, except in a few isolated instances, is neither practical nor popular.

Again, let me state my opening query: Why do men run? Several immediate possibilities come to mind.

1) To catch a member of the opposite sex. Refuted: this is usually done in an automobile today.

2) To escape a member of the opposite sex. Refuted: this type of individual cannot be found anywhere.

3) To obtain financial or other material subsidiation from an interested athletic group. Partially accepted, since many **practical** runners do take advantage of this opportunity. Note the emphasis given to the word practical in the preceding sentence.

4) To become a superb physical specimen (the "health fanatic" type). Refuted: only an insignificant number of persons have this reason, and most of them not for long, since their goal is an intangible one at best.

No, the above intentions are not acceptable in any rational sense, excepting number three.

For me and a number of others, running is a medium of esthetic activity, creative in much the same way as is sculpture, painting, or musical composition. Naturally, friendly competition enters into running, but what is more human or esthetically expressive than to compete with one's fellow men by employing personal ability and ingenuity, thereby stripping away the material aspects of life and thoroughly enjoying oneself? The original Olympic Games of ancient Greece were symbolic of the esthetic principles of running. In fact, until professionalism and hypocrisy entered the Olympic Stadium, the truest form of competitive and esthetic athletics had been achieved. This is the studied viewpoint stated so copiously by Professor Gardiner in his highly interesting volume, **Athletics in the Ancient World**.

Enjoyable, indeed, is walking along a clean, sandy beach with the sun shining brightly on your back. You see the sky, the sun, and the sand, all combined in a flash of contrasting colors; here is nature at her most beautiful. Many times I have felt this incomparable beauty, and the result is that my legs have begun to move faster in order to catch its entirety.

By running along a shaded bridle path, such as those in New York's Central Park, the runner instantly feels himself in communion with nocturnal nature. The cool dampness of the evening air seems to uplift the spirit after a sultry, lifeless day.

Did you ever watch ten or twelve young men lining up at the starting line for an upcoming race? I'll wager that you commented to the person beside you, "Boy, I really pity those poor saps; they'll kill themselves for absolutely nothing." But think again: why would they run, if not for some pleasant stimulus which urges them to participate, to endure, to experience, and possibly to triumph in their endeavor? A medal or a ribbon is but a paltry material gain; the true pleasure is the experience realized by the runner during his quest.

In like manner, the runner can realize the exhilarating effects of running on the tree-studded golf course during the late autumn; inhaling the crisp air tinged with the tanning of the decaying leaves can lift him from the level of purely physical enjoyment into a type of esthetic experience.

When the runner dons his sweatsuit and running shoes during the dead of winter and runs for an hour or so along a quiet rural road, a stuffy indoor January day assumes a new and exciting level in life. The chill winter air is a soothing balm to the stifled lungs of the runner after a long day of sedentary indoor activity.

Running is therefore a goal in itself, as well as being a means by which the runner may achieve a desired enjoyment. From such moments of intense feeling, love of running may come. For me, this is the background of running's esthetic principles. There is no practical value to the enjoyment of running; there is no material return to gain. There is merely the esthetic pleasure received by the runner from the activity. Here rests my case.

1960

The Sponge Throwers

Francis L. Daugherty

I

Gray flannel suits and homberg hats,
Grimy sweatshirts and low-rent flats,
I heard the people screaming,
As they went from day to day.
I heard the people screaming,

"When I was young," an old man said,
We worked like dogs to earn our bread.
We were hard-headed, bare chested—sweating men,
Big-boned, loud-voiced sweating men.

"We read the Bible and slept in school,
Discarded knowledge as a useless tool,
Plowed our fields and hoed our corn,
Rose with the roosters in the yellow morn,

"No problems then—
No thinking done—
Give me the good old days."

II

Cigarette smoke and black leather jackets,
Politician's smile and union rackets,
I heard the people crying,
As they lay down at night.
I heard the people crying for a peaceful night.

The young man said, "I hate that place;
We talk guided missiles and outer space,

Isaac Newton and the apple tree,
Study halls from one 'till three.

"A half-baked teacher from a two-year college,
Teaching mathematics with a basket-weaver's knowledge.
Writing on the blackboard,
Meaning not a thing,
How's this stuff related to my going steady ring?"

But it's not all bad—Good things are there,
Football games and duck-tail hair,
Senior proms and sock-hop balls,
Funny rhymes on rest room walls,
Typing class with old man Blair
(We tied him down and shaved his hair).

"We're mixed-up kids,
They tell us in their classes,
So they grade on the curve,
Where everybody passes.

Like, it swings. . . .man."

III

City Hall gleaming and a bright green park,
Mud-floor hovels and sobs in the dark,
I saw the people hoping for a better way of life.
I saw the people hoping for a useful life.

The old Negro sat, with his face in his hands,
Hearing all the music, but seeing not the bands,

Scraping on a fiddle with a spry old bow,
Wailing out the dirge of one race's woe.

"Times ain't changed," he said, with a smile,
"With me, a mile is still a mile.
Pullman's no good if you ain't got the money,
The world's still big . . . if you ain't got the money.

"My kids ain't doin' no better'n me,
Always fightin' for the rights that be.
Kickin' and a' scratchin' for the big-time place,
Catchin' dirty glances for the color of their face.

"One smart feller say, 'Let's build 'em up,
Let's give 'em lots of learnin',
And a filled-up cup.
Let's treat 'em equal and pretend they're white,
But it ain't no good,
We're black as the night.'

"I fought for our country. . . .World War One,
Got shot by a fast-firin' tommy gun,
They sent me home. . . .I was blind as the fog,
I got a white cane and a seein' eye dog.

"Spare a quarter?"

IV

White picket fences and self-satisfaction,
A smug complacence and a hate for action,
A seat of laurels,

A drink of wine,
"It's ancient Rome" is the student's whine.
"We're all going to go when that bomb hits here,
No more movies and no more beer.

"What are we gonna do?"

The times are passing, as we sit with a smile,
Like Native Dancer in the last quarter-mile,
The time to do is with us now,
Else we'll bury our cherished dream,
Enow.

Mrs. Gordon

Richard Oakley

Mrs. Gordon stepped from the suburban beauty parlor and patted the halo of curls closer to her head. She was almost happy. The sun made a mirror of the Fashion Shoppe window and she peered at the reflection she found there. Gilda really did a superlative job this time, she thought: rich, deep chestnut with just a hint of pewter glinting here and there. She was terribly grateful to modern science for helping her avoid that drab, salt-and-pepper hue one so often saw on women her age.

She continued up the walk which bordered the ell of the shopping center, glancing absently into shop windows as she walked and thinking dismally of her age. She had an hour to kill before her bridge game and she had hoped to spend it without the intrusion of any unpleasant thoughts, but she had been unable, all morning, to shake the feeling that she had lost ten years somewhere. Forty-eight this October and only yesterday she had been thirty and young. Where had the years gone? Were they simply a dreary, relentless procession of days like this one: rising at ten, lunch and shopping until mid-afternoon, then calling on equally bored friends? She had an uneasy feeling that if she died this week it would matter very little to anyone—least of all to herself. She doubted if anyone would notice her absence for several days—the children were grown and away from home; Horace spent as few waking hours as possible in their house. When he was not seeing his patients, he contrived to be busy at the hospital, so it was not unusual for her to take both lunch and dinner alone.

She sometimes wondered why she bothered to go home at all. Harriet managed the kitchen much better than she ever could and the cleaning woman freed her from the onerous chore of keeping house. It seemed that others had insinuated themselves into the position of controlling what should, by rights, be her domain. Was there a conspiracy afoot against women like her, a conspiracy which rendered them so useless that they would eventually wither in a hell of inactivity?

She brushed these thoughts away resolutely, knowing that in this direction lay, if not madness, at least neurosis. She had read enough magazine articles to recognize the signs. It wasn't that she found her life distasteful; it was just that she had nothing to do, no purpose, no—What was that silly word she heard some teen-agers using?—"kicks,"

that was it. Ellen, she told herself firmly, what you need is a "kick."

But what should it be? There was a problem. An affair? Too messy, too difficult to handle. Alcohol? She swiftly turned over in her mind the middle-aged drunks she had seen cavorting about the country club and dismissed this idea immediately. She didn't need money, so that eliminated stealing.

She paused beneath a quaint, cleverly aged wooden shield which swayed in the breeze as it bore its discreet legend: "Colony House—Fine Food." She marched inside and quickly found a half-concealed corner table. Ordinarily, she gave little notice to the décor of the Colony House, but today she glanced with a faint displeasure. Everything in the room was so appallingly quaint. The place fairly writhed with ill-matched natural woods, and prim little Hitchcock chairs thrusts themselves up from the floor every few feet, uncompromisingly, like starched black snakes. I don't believe, she decided abruptly, that I'll patronize the Colony House any more.

In her perusal she noticed idly that each table was equipped with a genuine pine salt cellar and pepper mill. These would match nicely with my curtains, she thought. I must remember to pick up a pair before . . . Her thoughts trailed off, tripped over a word, and then took up an entirely different thread. How strange, she thought slowly, that I should use a word almost daily without once noticing that it has more than one meaning. "Pick up," for instance, doesn't always mean "purchase." She smiled gleefully. Why not literally "pick up" a pair of table ornaments—this pair? It might be fun to steal some worthless trinket; it's something I've certainly never done before. She glanced around casually and saw that there were only three customers in the room; matrons like herself, each concentrating intently on one of the many low-calorie specials benevolently offered by the Colony House. Two waitresses were taking advantage of the hostess' absence by sneaking gulps of stolen tea in one corner. After making quite sure that no one was watching, Mrs. Gordon quietly opened her purse, slid the wooden articles off the table into it and surreptitiously drew out a handkerchief. Her head bowed, she coughed delicately several times and looked up nervously. Slowly, slowly, her eyes swept the room. No one had seen her. That's one advantage of being such an anonymous person, she thought grimly; they wouldn't notice me if I had an epileptic fit right here. Completely relieved, she lingered over her coffee fifteen minutes and left, smiling pleasantly at the hostess as she walked out.

Mrs. Gordon hummed merrily to herself as she opened her front

door that evening and placed her bundles on the hall table. Today had been exhilirating, more fun than she had had in years. It had taken all her self-control to keep from telling the girls at the bridge game about her new-found amusement. Tomorrow, she would try her hand at lifting from the other stores in the shopping center. Ah, tomorrow! She could hardly wait.

The next day, Mrs. Gordon went to the drugstore, bought three magazines and a jar of cold cream and made off successfully with a pair of earrings. Tawdry baubles they were, at the moment she prized them more than her engagement ring. She then went to the hardware store, where she bought a set of aluminum pans and managed to snitch, again successfully, a chisel and a screwdriver.

Throughout the remainder of the week, Mrs. Gordon found it necessary to make six trips to various shopping centers on the west side of town. Practice makes perfect, she thought frivolously, and by Saturday she felt she had acquired enough skill to tackle the downtown area.

Harmon-Mitchell was the largest, oldest and finest department store in the state. Mrs. Gordon had patronized it often in the past; it was the only place within a radius of two hundred miles where you could get really stylish models of Dr. Funk's orthopedic shoes. She tried on a pair and was trying to decide how to go about stealing the shoe-horn when something caught her eye. At the counter to her left was an attractive display of pens and pencils. Occupying the most prominent position were two elegant ladies' pens. Each was made of gold; each had a small diamond set into the clip-holder. One had a minute string of emeralds around the cap; the other had a similar setting of rubies. The price of each was clearly marked: sixty-five dollars. Here, she thought, is the acid test. If I can walk out of the store with one of those pens . . . It was delightful even to savor an anticipated victory; she could vividly imagine her triumph after so successful a **coup**.

After thanking the shoe-clerk, she gathered up her purse and her packages and wandered slowly to the stationery counter. She fingered several articles and slowly made her way along the counter until the pens were a few inches from her hands. She looked around carefully. The nearest clerk was several yards away with her back to Mrs. Gordon. There were a few men and women hurrying by with tense expressions on their faces. She watched for several minutes and saw that no one had looked her way for a long time.

She put her purse on the counter, drew a slip of paper from it

and scribbled something on it with one of the cheap pens from the rack. As she replaced the cheap pen, she let her hand brush across the case which held the gold pens. The one set with emeralds slipped out of its display box quite easily; she dropped it in her purse alongside the scrap of paper and strolled over to the greeting-card rack.

As she thumbed through the cards, a well-dressed young man moved around the counter and stood beside her. She paid no attention to him. When she turned to leave, he touched her elbow.

"Would you step to the office with me, please?" He smiled pleasantly.

Dear God, she thought wildly. **I've been caught!** She could taste salt on her lips and her brow felt unpleasantly damp and chilly. The purse slipped from her hands, and she watched with fascinated horror as the wretched pen rolled out and stopped an inch away from her foot. It seemed to grow larger and closer and she realized dimly that she could not hear anything, not even the excited crowd which gathered soon after she lost consciousness . . .

Mrs. Gordon closed the door to the manager's office behind her. She felt sure that it would be easier to walk on water than to traverse the short distance to the nearest exit sign. Nevertheless, with head high and cheeks flaming, she walked somewhat unsteadily to the parking lot, completely convinced that every eye was riveted on her back.

Driving home took almost more energy than she possessed, and as she pulled jerkily into her drive she noticed that her right leg was twitching visibly. Reaction from strain, no doubt. She was unreasonably irritated by the sight of her husband's car in the garage. The very day I need to be alone, need time to think, Horace takes the afternoon off. She shut off the motor and sat quietly, trying to arrange her thoughts.

Ghastly was the only word for the scene she had endured in the manager's office. Mr. Mitchell himself, whom Mrs. Gordon saw occasionally at the country club, came bustling in, bland and dapper. You understand, Mrs. Gordon, that even though we need not report this to the authorities, you must withdraw your account. As he talked, he assumed the nightmarish proportions of an ogre, and, as in a nightmare, Mrs. Gordon found herself paralyzed, voiceless, unable to retaliate. She thanked him meekly and stole out of the office, utterly cowed and exhausted.

Well, as hideous as the ordeal had been, an even nastier one was facing her. How could she tell Horace? Of course she would have to

tell him; it was a joint account and he would find out eventually. She infinitely preferred that he hear the story from her own lips instead of piecing it together from bits of gossip. What would he do? What would he say?

Mrs. Gordon drew a mirror from her purse and tried to repair the ravages of tears, fright and over-wrought nerves. Her hands paused in mid-stroke as she realized that, for the first time in years, she and Horace were actually going to **talk**. Not only that, they were going to talk about **her**, about her future, or rather, about their future. Of course, this was a hellish set of circumstances for a conversation, but in a strange, spine-chilling way, it was rather exciting.

She stepped out of the car briskly, almost gaily, and took some pains to rearrange her face before opening the front door. It would hardly do, she thought, to burst in grinning like a school-girl when I tell Horace he's married to a criminal.

1961

Requiem

(Richard Oakley, November 4, 1961)

Sue Taylor Grafton

There is nothing left to say of death.
All . . . every word and phrase, and every angry metaphor . . .
There is nothing that has not been said before.

Now that it is done, all memory is past
And we can add no more. Rejoice in what you knew of him
And do not mourn. Let there be no praise, nor blame,
No childish condemnation of the gods, no speculation, nor excuse.

But let us laugh as if we did not care at all,
Drink one last toast to this dead friend
And smash our glasses down against the wall.

1961

So Like a Walnut-Meat

Richard Oakley

So like a walnut-meat, picked primly
With a silver needle, nimbly
Did you pluck the heart from me.
How much more mercy would there be
In heavy, brutal, bludgeon-blows
That smash against your chimney-stones
—Dumb to pity, deaf to moans—
Both shell and contents there diffusing.
Far more mercy, Heaven knows,
Although, in your eyes, less amusing.

1962

There Is a Certain Sadness in the Poet

Judy Rogers

There is a certain sadness in the poet,
A certain deep felt anguish in the lover
That lends each understanding of the other
And sometimes, even, power to bestow it
Upon those who know no love or rhyme.
This is responsibility, to know
The meaning of the minor signs that show
That pain has come to visit for a time
And there is need of strength and hope and solace
The lover then must soothe, the poet, speak
And give of what he has to help the weak
With understanding care and without malice.
Thus duty rides along with comprehension
And pride must fly away with condescension.

1962

When One Knows

Barbara Reynolds

When
one soul
knows,
believes,
understands,
loves
another,
all the splendor
of the sun
shining on
mountain peaks
becomes
a guttering
candle
in the
quintessence
of the
rare
and
lovely
thing.

Suspended

Chloe Hughes

. . . Suspended, unraveling the ball
to sort, rewind
unrelated thoughts
in the mind.

. . . Twisting, turning
tumbling, falling
like tangled threads.
But the kitten becomes
bored and seeks other pleasures.

The sun weaves its light
through the silken hairs;
the kitten sleeps, its thoughts
scattered pleasantly
among the dreams, to awake
in awhile and find
the threads gone.

The Telling

Janice Woosley

They sat in their two chairs in front of the fireplace. They were very old. She sat far more than he did because she was not well, not even well for all of her 82 years. She knew that she was not well in a mild, insipid, senile way. He took care of her gently as old men move and with the remnants of a long time of love. Each morning he helped her out of the bed and up to the fire. Then the long flannel gown came off, and the dress with the buttons down the front went on. And the apron. She was not dressed without the apron. The long plait was twisted into a coil with jerking fingers. She could do that much.

He stirred carefully in the ashen coals in the fireplace. It was a meticulous stirring compounded of many years' experience, of knowing just how much to stir without causing the fire to go out. Then the wood. It was laid on the andirons, and the live coals raked up under it until they touched it. When the first blue blaze struggled up, the old man sat down. It took a lot of his strength, and he sat until he did not feel so light.

The day wore on, and the necessities were slowly finished. The cooking was more often burned than when the old woman was young, but now she didn't complain. Sundays the girls came, and usually they brought a pie or some apples. They combed the old woman's hair, and she grimaced because the tangles hurt. They laughingly said she was tender-headed, and they loved her. The old man did not comb her hair. After the girls left on Sunday the old woman would likely say, "I wish the girls would come. They don't ever come anymore." Her memory grew shorter each day. And the old man would not say anything.

The nights they had the television he sat very close to it off to the side. She sat far back in the rocking chair with the cloth back that curved to fit her humped back. Neither of them knew what was going on. The old man could not see so close, and the old woman did not understand. But they enjoyed it. It was good for conversation.

"Emil, what are they doing? Is that a dog that boy's leading?"

He laughed, chuckling in his bulging stomach. "Look at that, Julie, did you see that man jump out of the hayloft. I wonder if he'll get away. It looks to me like that would have hurt him to jump so far down."

"Emil, do you see a light out the window?"

"What, Julie?"

"I see a light."

"Look, Julie, that's the kind of shortening I use to cook in. Except I don't cook stuff like that for you." He chuckled.

"Do you see that light, Emil?"

"Huh? Oh that?" He turned his thoughts from the western and its commercials. "That's the television screen reflected."

"What comes on next?" The western had only begun.

"I don't know. Maybe we'd better go to bed. The fire is low. If I put on wood, I'll have to stay up until it burns down a little."

"Emil, are you sure that's not a light out there?"

They slept the light, brittle sleep of the old that night. Once Emil stirred and got up to fix the fire a little better. Julie did not move. The two big pillows propped her head in an unnatural position, but old people do not move so easily. Her breath came slow and measured. She slept dreamless.

Emil fixed the fire in his tedious manner, and walked heavily, but with attempted lightness, back to bed. Soon he slept again. Things of long ago skipped lightly through his sleeping mind. He was a young man again, and Julie had long hair and was beside the snowball bush in a flocked lavender dress with a white sash. The day was hot, very hot, and she had a fan, but she didn't use it. She seemed cool from somewhere inside and had no need for it. They talked of nice things, of what they would do with all their days, of the children they would have, and the time that would bring only good things. The sky met earth, and the union was a happy one. Beautiful. Everything good. Then he awoke. Julie slept dreamless beside him, the flannel gown faded, the long plait unwound. He smiled in the darkness, a toothless smile of old age.

The next morning Emil awoke at five o'clock as was his custom. He had nothing in particular to wake up for, but the habit of years would not let him sleep. He lay awake a few minutes not moving. His joints ached from long staying in the same position. Especially his hands hurt. He sometimes wondered what he would do when his hands got past doing. What would Julie do? And then he would think that he would be going before that, and probably Julie, too. She was in bad health. With that he thought again of his dream. Of Julie. Of days before he became old.

He lay until it began to turn a drab gray outside the window. Then it was a lighter pink gray, and finally it was dawn. He remembered the dream that was so welcome a reprieve from the foolish thinkings of being old. He smiled. Today would be special. Today Julie and I will talk about things, he thought. It will be a good day. We will talk.

He arose and painstakingly put on his clothes, being careful to get his gray sweater buttoned right. It was stretched thin over his bulging abdomen. The girls had washed it in water too hot the last time. It was all right though. Today he and Julie would talk.

The fire had almost gone out during the night. When he raked the ashes back, only a small coal showed red. He had to choose a small piece of wood and place it carefully at that. Finally it burned a thin blue blaze. He was shivering in his gray sweater. Julie stirred.

"Emil, where are you?"

"Here I am, Julie, now you just lay still till the fire burns better. It's almost out."

"I think I need a drink of water. My mouth feels awfully dry. Do you think I need one of those blue pills. What did the doctor say they were for?"

"I'll get you a drink in a minute, Julie. You'll feel better after I get some breakfast fixed. I don't think you need a pill this early. The doctor said to take them only before going to bed."

He went to the kitchen and got her a glass of water, being careful not to let his trembling spill it. Julie reached for it blindly, causing some of it to spill on the quilt.

"Emil, that's cold," she said, "I wish you hadn't spilled it. Are you sure about that blue pill?"

Emil helped her out of bed and to get dressed. He held the two shiny black hairpins for her while she put up her plait. Then he went to the kitchen to cook breakfast. He had been doing the cooking for a long time now. Julie was sick.

All the while he was cooking he kept thinking about the dream. It had been so real. Occasionally he grinned as he cooked. He could hardly wait to tell Julie, but he must tell her at the right time. This was special. They would talk.

He did not tell her during breakfast, nor all that morning. It wouldn't do to tell her while he was doing the work. He'd tell her after dinner when the dishes were washed, and he could sit by the fire. Yes, he'd tell her after the dishes were done, and he had carried in some wood for the fire. Then he could rest, and he would tell her. He could hardly wait. The morning seemed very long.

He pulled her hump-backed chair up to the fire and helped her to it. She had on her yellow cloth shoes with the rubber soles so she

wouldn't fall. He grinned at her. Then he began.

"Julie, guess what! I had a dream last night. Let me tell you."

"Tell me, Emil?"

"Julie, I had a dream last night, and we were by the snowball bush, and you had on a lavender dress. You remember that lavender dress you had the summer before we married, don't you? The one with the white sash? We talked that day behind the snowball bush. Do you remember?" Emil paused to quell the tremble in his eager, quaking voice.

"Emil, do you think I might ought to take that blue pill now," she said. "I still don't feel very good."

"Julie, do you remember the dress I'm talking about? Well, remember that . . ."

"Emil, is that a cat I see sitting on the window sill. It seems he wouldn't sit there with the wind blowing so. It is cold today."

"Julie," his voice quaked higher, "let me tell you about what we said in the dream last night. You said exactly what you did that day behind the snowball bush. You said . . ."

"I wish you'd give me that pill. My head hurts real bad. And try to scare that cat away. He sits there every day."

Emil trembled with wanting to speak, with wanting to tell her. He was almost crying tiny little dry tears.

"Julie, please listen to me. I want to tell you something."

"I tell you I need that pill and I need it now, Emil. My head hurts. Can't you hear me?"

Emil sat in his chair until he did not want to cry. His hands did not want to tremble so. His voice became normal again. He felt light much as he did after he carried in the wood and put it on the fire. Slowly he got up and reached for the blue pill bottle.

1964

Night Wind

Carol Blankenship

We roar down the night
Making a line of life
Through three points . . .
The great light that splits the darkness,
You shielding me from the on-coming
World with you body,
And me in my scarf and sweatshirt
My slacks and tennis shoes.
The wind is our own and
It kisses our faces with cool night kisses.
We mock the eunuchs of life
In their warm, enclosed, four-wheeled
Boxes of security which stare at us
For a moment with two glaring eyes.
If I were a pennant, I would slap
The wind furious with speed.
Instead my hands have warmed two
Places on your coat where I hold you.
We lean around a curve where
Black tree tops worship the moon
On out way to a turning point
Where life will stop for a while
And go backward.

1964
Fragile
Sam Edwards

There . . .
Cracks of antiquity
Showing
Peeps of holiness
Through
Stained glass windows
Binding
God to the World
Like
A bridge of
frosty
fibers

1965
Sage
Charles F. Whitaker

Ashamed of youth, I waited for that stage
when, wise, I would don the sage attire;
Pipe, Ph.D., receding brow; and then retire
Amid my pensive, sure, philosophy.

Ashamed of age, I now await. The stage:
Receded brow, pipe, Ph.D. And thus attired,
I wait, when wise, I might a sage retire
Amid a pensive, sure, philosophy.

1965

Wrapped in Steel

Judy Beth Gibson

I. For snow still falls
upon the grass
and touches my hand
with the same touch
felt by da Vinci
The mountains
look the same
as when Aristotle
looked upon them.
Caesar saw and felt
the same sun
I know today;
Great Sol knows
no change.
I stand alone
and view
Cleopatra's sky,
azure and infant-like
in blue.

II. A vapor trail
may cross
the sky's tree-framed
blue bowl,
as a jet plane streaks
on its swift
unwavering flight.
Snow melts to grey-smoked slush
on salted asphalt.
The sun glares from shining
aluminum roofs.
Iron-meshed towers

climb the mountains
with stilt legs
seventy feet long,
dragging steel cables over their shoulders.

III. I should hate progress
and despise the cold steel
that entwines about
this earth,
if it could ever halt
the fall of snow,
change the color
of the sky,
or lift one mountain,
dashing it to ruin.
I comfort in the thought
that modern man
has not the strength
or will
to forfeit beauty
or subject to change
the ancient,
fundamental splendors
Nature gives,
for progress
wrapped in steel.

1966

Violin

Judy Beth Gibson

There from the flood-light stage
Vague . . .
The cigarette smoke haze,
A whispering room . . .
Suddenly with the darkness—
Hushed . . .
Silent
Up
Lept the bow,
Caressed the strings,
The sienna wood vibrated
With liquid sound . . .
With beauty . . .
With eyes closed
The listener feels the melody . . .
Here in this green forest,
Fragrant and vernal
Leaps the doe,
By her side the frail fawn
Tiptoes . . .
By the brook
That sings and races
I stand alone
Listening to the violin
That sighs
In the distance
With silver sound,
Throaty
Like a flute . . .
My heart leaps up
Allegro . . .
The note dies slowly
And the forest fades . .

1966

Biography

Beth McDaniel

I watched you yesterday
And I saw you press fragrant
Violets
Between pages of well-worn
Books
And whisper pale water-color wishes
To the wind.

Today I saw you touch honey-scented
Hair
Held gently like a golden locket
Between bronze, firm
Hands
Wishing in oil and tempera now
Quick-splashed wishes on a pulsing canvas—
And answered gently
By the pink-tinged promise
Of apples
Hanging on the wind.

The last time . . .
I saw you heave a sick-sweet
Sigh of jasmine
And dust away
Fragile cobweb wishes
Half-formed, hazy charcoal etchings.
I saw you grow old
Paper-thin
Crackly-brittle
And blow away—
Wish-torn fragments—
On a wistful, wanton wind.

1967
Wind in the New House
John Carpenter

There are other sounds, of course, all indistinguishable
From one another, but I can hear so plainly that one, hollow
Moaning that seems to fill the dark rooms with pale sound.
It's outside somewhere, breathing chuckles of fury, battering
Down on my roof.

I thought a moment ago I heard a little rain with it, but no,
Just nothing. A big long inhalation that doesn't end. No rain.
I was wrong. Nothing to break the long breathy silence. It's
Outside somewhere, whispering along the eaves and flaking dried
Paint from awnings.

But it's all outside. Nothing to stir the inside of the house.
The ghosts that are chairs and tables and couches and footstools
Are very still and wrinkled. The nails in the walls are skinny
Thumbs from naked plaster. It's outside, somewhere, but I'm
Inside and warm.

But now the ghosts begin to move and flap. It must have been
That shutter banging open. Now it's inside. The ghosts' flesh
Peels. The nail hasn't moved. Now it's inside. The sound is
Louder now. It's inside. The ghosts fly away and underneath are
Chairs and tables and couches and footstools, and I am afraid.

1967
Freedom
Tommy Winstead

Freedom
is in a history book
I read a couple of times
about this piece of paper
that guaranteed that I could
be a me,
a separate identity 'me',
different from you
and them.
Then I read about this spirit
that makes the master,
and the master
has made a slave
of 'me'.
There is no 'you' and 'I'
anymore
we're 'us',
The master makes us slaves now
they have taken 'you' and 'I'
out of the vocabulary in America
there is nothing left
but third person plural
objective case.
But I want to be 'me'
first person singular
in any case
I have to be free
to feel inside of me
without finding
"Conformity-confirmed"
imprinted
through-out my life

freedom will make me master,
spirits will make ghost stories
and alcoholics
anonymous
gods.

1968

The Beauty of It All

Linda Lenihan

It's spring again.
Once more poets
Stuff greedy hearts with fervor
Of love and
The beauty of it all.
        But I cannot help but say,
        (Aside, of course, for who am I
        To disparage God's ways?)
        That it is but chlorophyll
        And I am void of feeling.
                A sadness.....no...
                A dullness is somewhere.
                Things happen,
                Then they are gone
                And that is all they are to me:
                A passing.

1968

Boxes

Roger Selvidge

I've seen people depart
In bright gleaming everlasting
Stainless steel boxes within boxes,
Pillowed for perfect posture.
Airtight containers that carefully can
Men who were once men enough to
Decay with the wood.

1969

And the Jungle Looked Down on It All . . .

William Martin

The world is green and dank here in the jungle. Layers of mist hang suspended in the oppressing heat and the riot of insane vegetation running rampant is wet, constantly dripping. Nature's sweet perfume mingles with the stench of a thousand years decadence rising from the floor and a faint breath of airs stirs this blanket of stagnant odor. The silence of the forest is broken by the myriad forms of life, animal and insect, that populate this mystery. The faint, hushed rustle of foliage brushing foliage gives a sinister atmosphere to the serenity. The jungle is alive, yet not with a life of its own. Colorful birds flit from tree to tree, their flight graceful, their cries musical. Snakes, their molten flesh blending with the floor of the jungle, lend their barely perceptible presence. Scurrying animals dart about, fleeing from some unseen, unheard alien life. And beneath this canopy of interwoven vines and leaves the world of the jungle is alive. The walls of green seem to close; draw nearer in this perpetual dusk. And the jungle looks down on it all.

Carefully, inch by inch, Allen moved forward. Inch by filthy inch he crept; half buried in slime, reeking of stale sweat, smelling of fresh fear, he crept closer to the slight rise in the floor of the swamp. A host of insects, attracted to this strange form of life, feasted. Their progress from his nostrils to his ears and finally to his eyes had to be ignored lest an incautious movement alert the unknown; that menace always lurking in the minds of men at war. His green clad form, caked with the filth and debris of the jungle floor, blended to his background as he slowly parted the interwoven network of thorn branches in front of him. Tears, decades, eons passed as he waited, ever wary. Then the sign, the telltale movement of alien life.

Ling Ti stopped and then eased back on his haunches. With true Oriental patience he watched his men build their simple camp. The small, green clad men worked with a minimum of movement, for the day had been long. They used the bountiful jungle, reaping the harvest of its opulence. Taking bamboo and vines, they assembled hasty shelters for the precious equipment they had carried so far. Covered with the filth of the jungle and the dirt of their journey, faces brown and streaked from the sweat of their labors, they soon finished the camp. Only minutes later it was hidden from all but the most careful search. From the habit of years at was they first checked the camp, then melted

into a hidden, protective circle in the tangle of brush around the small clearing. Quickly the small, hard balls of rice were eaten and they huddled down into the oozing, rotten mass of vegetation that is the floor of a rain forest. There would be little sleep, but rest, precious little as there was, must be had. The march had been long and hard, but the cause was great and the end was near.

The branches were eased back to their resting places and the matted swamp grass lay crushed as Allen crept back through the swamp; back from his place of vantage. Quickly formulating a plan he slipped back to his waiting men. As he neared them they rose from the ground and clustered about him. In quick, concise details he told of his plan and issued his orders. Each man's reaction to impending death is different, yet with almost religious intensity each looked to his weapon and readied himself for this game called war. At a silent signal they rose as one and melted into different parts of the jungle.

Broken rays from the dying sun filtered down through the dense ceiling of leaves and vines. The scattered beams of golden light danced across the faint clearing beside which Ling Ti sat. With a look of near rapture on his face he marveled at the striking contrast of nature. Flowers, drawing their substance from this vile earth, yet blossoming into brilliant, beautiful creations, unequaled by man. The colorful plumage of the birds clashed with the rancid, putrid floor of the jungle, yet each was a form of nature's beauty. And with his eyes absorbed in the delicate patterns of light dancing through the mist, he missed the ominous hush of sound, the fleeting, telltale movement that in the jungle is the harbinger of death.

A mere wave of the hand and then nothing. Just that quick flitting motion seen only because it was watched for at that exact instant. All was ready. Men in mud-caked green hiding in the thick fringe of jungle, readied their instruments of death against men in mud caked green lying in the protective fringe of underbrush. A prophetic hush fell over the land and in that silence was hope.

The silence was shattered; shattered by a thousand fragments of steel ripping into the bodies of men. Shattered by waves of steel, sheets of fire and the shuddering blast of sound raking through the jungle. A hundred birds, shocked from their perches, fled from this insult. Their shrill, raucous cries protesting this indignity. Leaves, shorn from the trees by the holocaust, fluttered peacefully down only to be torn anew amist this oasis of life in the wilderness. The screams of tortured men cut short, the stench of sudden death and the reek of burned cordite

replaced the serenity of the jungle. The floor of the clearing was torn again as the searching fingers of steel raked back, until nothing moved; until nothing dared move. Clouds of smoke, interposed with flashes of light, hung over the ravaged ground and the sounds of war reigned supreme. And in that instant of time it was over. The fire and the fury had done their deeds; silence swept back over the land and in that silence was nature's apology.

Slowly, ever so slowly the birds returned to view the residue. A smoke-blackened fragment of life smouldered in the clearing; dying. Fresh earth, heaped from the new scars already healing, shown brightly. The smell of blood, newly spilled, drew even more animals to view the passing show. They drew near the edge of the clearing, gathering ever closer to satisfy themselves the danger was over. The heat oppressed and the jungle dripped. Slowly the life of the jungle began anew.

A tattered, bloody bundle of bloodstained green lay crumpled beneath a thorn bush where it had been thrown by the violence of its end and the beauty of nature closed around.

Across the clearing a green clad body lay as if peering through a tangle of brush. He gave the impression of alert stillness as he lay silently watching. The host of everpresent insects flew and crawled about his head; creeping into his nostrils, his ears, and into the gaping, bloodcrusted hole that had once been his eye.

And the jungle looked down on it all . . .

1969

the reason henri bollinger got all dressed up today

David L. Rowans

i went to a funeral today
not because i knew who died
but i wanted to write a poem
and a corpse is usually very inspiring

but they wouldn't let me see him

the coffin was closed
and as i walked past the casket
i jerked the top off and slammed it back
before anyone could see
and i walked on out laughing
because i was the only one who knew
that the only thing in the bronze box
was a mirror
and i know because
i went to a funeral today
not because i knew who died
but i wanted to write a poem

1970

A Dragon Is Dead on High Street

Thomas E. Fuller

Grime-crusted warehouses slump dismally
Along streets paved with uneven cobblestones
And rain-soaked newspapers.
Ancient and once respectable Victorian homes,
Resplendent in rotting gables and peeling paint,
Huddle together as if for warmth
Over cramped over-grown lawns.
And up the scuffed marble stairways,
By mahogany banisters and empty picture frames,
The old men climb.
Climb to dismal dirty little rooms
With broken furniture
Lit by naked lightbulbs.
There they sit and drink their cold soup
while small black boxes make grey images
And the years slowly break their backs.

1970

The Hypocrite

Marthalee Atkinson

Smug little hypocrite, sitting in church,
Happy you're you and not some poor sinner.
You've seen the light, God rejoices in you.
You wouldn't smoke or dance or touch the devil's cup;
Those things are evil abominations, tokens of the world.
Instead, you'll just sit there, condemning your brothers,
Shaking your head because they're going to hell.
Thou shalt not kill, so, of course, you wouldn't do it.
You just kill characters with your own choice of
weapons—
A lifted brow, an intonation, a smirk of a smile.
Thou shalt not steal, no you would never do that.
You only steal trifles like trust and happiness
No other gods before you?
None but your place among 'the chosen people'.
Don't worry, Brother, God won't forget you.
Like the Bible has told you, you shall have your reward.

1971

Two Unrelated Poems

Nancy Banks

if you've ever
watched small ants
work together
breaking hills
into crumbs
they can carry
on their heads
to their houses
to be slowly
piled atop
one another
till they build
a mosaic
shrine of sorts
that is many
times their size
then you know
all about
what it is
to exist;

if you've ever
seen small ants
work together
breaking hurt
into crumbs
they can handle
in their minds
till they've found
in each one
some small beauty
they can use
to create
a mosaic
god of love
that is many
times their strength
then you know
something of
what it means
to live.

1971

What Time Does the Party Start?

Bill Martin

Everyone could see the clock on the wall. They could imagine, even if they couldn't hear it because of the noises, the incessant ticking. It never seemed to hurry; deliberately and inevitably in its self-contained world it recorded the deterioration of respectability, the loss of the staid facade which never helped anyone's party. But they weren't looking at the clock, in fact, they seldom looked at each other. After all, it was a party wasn't it? There really hadn't been time for the gradual forgetting of self and the relaxing of that self-portrait which each presented to the great cold and cruel.

There was one off to the side, hovering over an ash tray in the corner, who really wondered. "Hey Harve, you're strangely quiet tonight." Harve located the speaker from across the room, decided that one couldn't really respond to an implied question of that nature, and simply smiled and shrugged his shoulders. The speaker got up and carefully threaded his way through the conversations that clustered on the floor, never forgetting his carefully cultured and pleasantly entertaining party smile. "What's the matter Harve, have a rough day?"

"Not really. I suppose it's still just too early."

"Don't tell me you're one of those who intend to stay sober and remind everyone of the asses they made of themselves?" Another question that was never intended to be answered, thought Harve as Larry chuckled at his own wit. Nevertheless, he responded as expected. "I swear never to say a word. You see, I have this camera. . ."

"Well if the pictures turn out good send two sets to me," Larry tossed over his shoulder as he turned to entertain others.

The party was starting to loosen up now, thought Harve. The first returns were in, the first dancing had started and the inevitable music lover had turned up the inevitable stereo to a painful, vibrating roar. Harve turned to the girl beside him and commented in passing, "You know, I've often wondered in the music gets so loud to make the dancing better or to cover up the conversation?" The girl turned smiling, snapping her fingers to the music and shuffling her feet in the appropriate rhythm as she called out loudly "What?"

"Never mind, it was nothing important."

"What . . . I can't heard you, the music is too loud."

"That's what I said, the music is too loud."

She edged over closer and cupped her hand over her ear as she placed her head near his mouth. "I still can't hear you. What did you say?"

"I said God is good."

She jumped back to see if he was serious, decided he couldn't be and then rewarded him with a smile. "Do you want to dance?" she said as she returned to her shuffling routine. When he shook his head she drifted away looking for another mirror to appreciate her.

Harve walked to the kitchen and popped another beer. Behind him, huddled over the kitchen table, were two couples discussing the beauty of honesty and acceptance of others. "Man, if it's your own thing, it's got to be beautiful." Harve leaned over the table and they all turned to look at their new audience. Smiling serenely, Harve turned slowly looking each in the eye and walked toward the other room. Behind his back he just had time to hear "Hey, you bastard, what do you think . . ." before he was back in the world of Janis Joplin and other madness.

The lamp shade was just being picked up off the floor. Someone had made it—the first drunk of the evening. He was dancing with Harve's old conversation mate, and naturally he was trying to force her into a corner so he could play that well known party game of rubbing bodies. Unfortunately, she kept getting out of his way—but never too far out of his way; that would spoil the game.

Harve surveyed the room quickly and then started browsing through the various conversations. The risque jokes he skipped and the politics were boring so he claimed a place against the wall near an exchange of apparent profundities and checked the clock again.

The speaker was a natural for the part. He not only had long hair and a moustache, he also had bell-bottoms, turtleneck and beads topped off with the expected wire-framed eyes. No doubt about it—he was an authority.

"Love baby, that's where it's at. Love has got to be the only good left lying around. I mean, you can love anybody when you work at it, when you really groove with what's happening today." A quick check to make sure he still had his audience and then he threw his gem. "Now check Wanda here" he said as they all dutifully checked out Wanda. "Now this chick thinks love fills out her skivies . . ." he paused while all chuckle at his humor and Wanda playfully slaps his arm, "but man, sex just don't get it. I mean, you gotta love people even when you got clothes on."

With the appropriate look of awe and interest, Harve said "Hey, is it easier to love Wanda when she's got her clothes on or off?"

"Baby, I just said sex ain't enough, didn't I?"

"No, I'm serious. Is it easier or not?" With a slight pause he continued "I mean, aren't clothes just a facade?"

"I guess it would be easier—I mean, when you got your clothes off you got to be honest—yeah, it would be easier."

Harve looked around as he nodded his head in agreement. "Wanda, are you a believer?" She looked around for encouragement, hesitated a moment and then said "Well, yes . . . sure, I guess so."

"Then why don't you take off your clothes, that's when you can really relate to people isn't it?"

Superbrain jumped into the breach. "Man, what you say is beautiful, but the conditions just ain't right—-bad vibrations."

Harve looked around, saw the assent on their faces and responded with "You mean there is such a thing as conditional love, or people who shouldn't love, or people who aren't worthy of love?

"No man, I mean there are people here who wouldn't accept her body without sex. They're straight man, they just don't feel. They'd really look down on Wanda man."

"Then you must mean you are only supposed to love people who love you, or who agree with you, or who aren't straight." Now Harve was getting the dirty looks. Superbrain came back with "No, no man" as if to a child, "you got it wrong. If Wanda went nude here, it wouldn't be beautiful; these people would think sex man—nothing else."

"But isn't sex a part of love?"

"Man, that's your hang-up, you work it out" he said disgustedly as he turned and went to find another mirror to appreciate him.

Harve headed for another beer. A new group had formed in the kitchen and they were deciding whether some couple that wasn't at the party had a chance to make it or not. He left just as it got to "Hey, did you hear about her and . . ."

Wanda was waiting for him at the doorway. "Did you really want me to take off my clothes out there in front of everybody?"

"Would it really matter if I did?"

Wanda shrugged, "I just wanted to know if you really meant it. I mean, well . . . you know, some people would get up tight wouldn't they?"

"Wanda what do you care about their hang-ups? Look, if you

want to go nude—do it. Let them accept you or not, it doesn't matter."

"Well I mean, it's not like I want to."

"Then don't. I need a drink anyway."

On his way through the room, Harve glanced at the clock. For a full sixty seconds he watched the sweep hand. Then he glanced over the room again. The drunks were more plentiful, the music just as loud, and the smoke a little thicker. More and more of the clusters were breaking into couples and a few of the couples were leaving. The dancing was more boisterous now and the space for dancing was slightly larger. Harve could hear the clock—above it all he could hear the clearly audible ticks.

He glanced once more around the room and took a deep pull at his beer. Wanda walked by and he reached out, put his arm around her and pulled her with him to another cluster of couples talking quietly within their own intimate circle. Wanda leaned her head against his shoulder and smiled into his eyes.

They were welcomed into the group as they sat on the floor and as their bodies gratefully touched. Harve just had time to notice the clock and then he could no longer hear the clearly audible ticks . . .

1972
Isolation
Nancy Banks

The world is a blind street beggar
And every face a trinket
For its cup. It would grope
To touch, but is too easily satisfied
With smiles—big sous.
In morning as I walk outside
I watch my smile drop
Jingling in the tins of passers-by.
The hollow ring that follows isn't mine.

I am frightened; I must
Steal back those smiles bartered by others,
Used like bait—dangled
Before the pitiful greed of merchants.
The smiles snapped by strangers
And shown as proof in somebody's scrapbook
That somebody's daddy had lots of friends,
I don't want that.
I don't photograph well.

I would leave my soul as offering
But there are no takers: it is too much
Giving to be handled in cups
And would cripple blinded begging.
With their wisdom of unseeing I am left
Deserted, a spot light without audience.
My only comfort is the feel
Of my own shaking as I hear the echoes
Of hollow rings, dropping smiles.

1972
untitled
Max Garland

The pumpkin-sleeved singer
like a black John Keats
makes an awkward bow and becomes
one more thing we knew—my how
those poets write flashy for a while.

1976

Crow Men

Denise Newbolt

wrinkled crow men
perch on their paint-chipped benches
magpieing to each other
about how the river has raised
and whose new houseboat is that
they scratch and poke around
between trees and swings
nodding days away
rolling one eye sideways when
a strange bird comes
wasting along the sidewalk
so the old crows
flap through the days
until spring boat races
bring all the gall-darned
excited fools
downtown to watch a river
that has always been the same
to the birds
boats or no.

1976

Against Pro Nouns

Cynthia Minor

Oh heavy words,
heavy, heavy words
strangling around throat
burning tongue dry
Choke back
tightening tongue and jaw
Back teeth grinding
chewing the letters
and swallowing
a personal and possessive
lump of self.

1977

In the Cornfield

Denise Newbolt

falling down into the middle of the field
yellow breezes
run through thick
corn silks
and leave them
drizzled in buttery
sunshine
warm light seeps
among tall green
stalks creating
jungle patterns
big hairy caterpillars
prowl between leafy rows
with cool dirty toes
happy little child wanders
in wilderness, crashing
the corn patch.

1977

Cincinnati Superhighway: Summer 1972

Gail Yarbrough

he was a man
a regular man
not regular really
the springs and sprockets and gears and things that go
ping-ping
went all funny in his head
he was crazy
how did he feel when he stepped off the island
that the metal and rubber and blinding lights
would evaporate as he
with royal mein and stately tread
ignored them
or scared like a chicken
did he fling himself into the stream of things
blind in mad terror
not hoping to survive
perhaps he welcomed the death angel as a brother
a deliverer
and went of a purpose to meet him
the sodden lump that was him
tells no tales
but lies there leaking life
and the cars roll by
and the cars roll quickly by

1978

The Room

James Gover

The nightclub singer keeps on singin' tho' nobodies listenin'.

She watches the couple in the corner noisily discussin' armageddon, 'n' tries to ignore the drunk who's throwin' up on her shoes.

The cops stand around in ratty jeans 'n' marine corp haircuts, waitin' for the comediene to say a bad word.

The resident poets lecture on existentialism to those too drunk to walk away, while the unpublished author spills his J&B on Albert Camus in the pocket of his inevitable tweed jacket.

The hookers stand in the doorways with warm smiles on their lips 'n' empty eyes. 'n' all the broken men come to them, payin' the price of loneliness.

1978

untitled

Denise Boston

Shadowed images outline budding trees
and sway gracefully in the darkness.

They move with all the skill of a violinist,
possessed with the emotion and glory of sound
and all the gentleness of starry-eyed lovers
embraced in stormy night dances.

Leaves rustle in the blustery lack of light
and lonely thoughts run rampant on the
mind's dusty backroads.

The music stops. . .
the mood is broken by
empty words and
wasted time.

1979

Bill Leap

Sheila Riley

Bill Leap moved into the shack on Perry Street and called it his mansion.
He sold his spray-painted Chevy to a Jaycee-sponsored demolition derby
and for $50 bought a used stove and sold it for $125.
Every Wednesday Bill would hitch to Frankfort and peddle the county paper
for a nickle profit a sale.
He'd always save one for Mam Ma and drop it by around time for the dinner whistle
to blow, and Mam Ma always saved him a piece of chicken wrapped in Reynolds wrap.
Once Bill Leap stopped me in the road and asked me to read a notice he'd gotten from the government about his social security checks.
That was when I was seventeen,
and I thought how awful it must be to be 80 and not recognize my own name.
Old Bill the Watermelon boy gave me the funnies section from the Sunday paper and laughed that
"Ain't it funny how they only make funnies colored one day a week?"
And I laughed.
He didn't go to Second Baptist to hear the gospels preached, but spread his joys to three blocks to town right along with "Hymns for Him Singer" broadcast live, compliments Eveready batteries.
Once Bill spied a rattler under his porch and the fire department and rescue squad responded with hose and axes, and laughter,
but Bill took it all seriously.
Perennial attic and basement cleaner, he probably knew more town secrets than any biddy gossiper.
Bill Leap boarded up his windows in the winter and tied back his

sunflowers
so they'd grow straight when spring came.
Once Bill got drunk on Bud's and spent Saturday night in Dena's jail, and ashamed to tell it, swore to courthouse cronies it must've been the bad water
he'd been drinking since the lake turned over last July.
Bill Leap knew you if you were new in town and if you weren't he remembered
the day you were born.
In the semi-hot June morning dust by Clate Chandler's barber shop,
Bill would scoff at vacationers passing through: City oil-slick sunbathers...
"Lookee there, if yourn got a tan like ol Bill here, no need catchin' sunshine."
He entertained the street kids with stories of his ordinary life, but he always seemed to come out the hero.
Bill Leap lived his Saturdays easy with monthly social security and Jack Daniels
and never asked for Sunday School prayers.
Once he learned to sign his name and got voted Countian of the Year and after that, Bill Leap spent most his morning teaching white folks how to catch sunshine.

1979

The Phenomenal Car of Mr. McCoober

Ann Travelstead

Mr. McCoober liked to say that he was a prudent man with a respect for figures. Numbers fascinated him, intrigued and enthralled him. He lived his life by numbers and for them.

Among other chains of numbers, he could recite his Social Security number, bank account and insurance policy numbers and the zip codes of sixty-two cities where he knew no one. He could reel off not only the license number but the engine serial number of his shiny, blue ten year old car.

It pleased him when he was mistaken for an accountant, which often happened. In truth, he sold socks and shirts at the downtown department store and had been doing so since he left college in the first year. He was hired, primarily, because of his dark good looks, but that was before most things about him thickened and thinned, hardened and softened in all the wrong places.

He was a meticulous salesperson.

"I never forget a neck size," he would assure a customer.

And, he was in great demand at inventory time, for one of his recounted joys was finding an error in computerized stock counts.

At home, he was equally punctilious. Each time he went upstairs, he counted the fourteen steps. He brushed each upper and lower quadrant of teeth fifty times, saw his dentist two duly recorded times a year and did thirty push-ups each morning. Much of the time, he counted aloud. It was this that set Mrs. McCoober's fine smile on edge. But, reminding herself of the many negative qualities that he did not have, she softened her smile, forgave him and loved him.

She thought him still handsome and she recognized the value of thrift, while regretting at times, his constant attention to it.

Twice a week, when Mrs. McCoober brought groceries home on the bus, making a transfer en route, he listed each item and cost. Over the eleven years of their marriage, his remarks on making the notations had changed only in inflection. When he and Mrs. McCoober, a rather handsome redhead who had thickened and thinned in the right places, were first married, he would enter an item with a matter of fact comment.

"Thirty cents for a loaf of bread." Period.

This later became, "*Forty-seven cents* for a loaf of bread!"

Exclamation.

Now, he would say, "Seventy-five cents for a loaf of *bread*?"

Whenever a number changed, it pained him. He felt threatened to the point of outrage. Numbers were solid, fixed facts. He would have been more comfortable on finding that one of his eyes changed color than facing a shifting number, so he kept track.

In a fine and tidy hand, he entered expenditures in several unblotched books. His ledgers has numerous categories, some with long columns of entries, others with very few. Under "Entertainment," for example, there was only a short series of monthly entries that read "Gas for Mother's Outing."

It so happened that one day his entries in the little green book marked "Automobile Log and Operating Expense Record" revealed that the shiny blue car had become a liability, fiscally speaking. Although inconvenient breakdowns had made him and his entire car pool late for work twice and late getting home six times, it was the indisputable sums of figures that convinced him.

"Figures don't lie, you know," he said when he told Mrs. McCoober of his decision to buy a new car. "And, with the old one as a trade-in—"

"Trade-in? Why, you promised that car to me when we got a new one," Mrs. McCoober reminded him. It was one subject that they had discussed often. He had, she thought, really, truly promised.

"Don't get agitated, dear," he soothed. "You really won't be needing it. They're building a new supermarket just seven blocks from here. And, the car is in prime condition. Just needs a little mechanical adjustment. Make a fine first car for some young person. And, with the savings on gas, you know—." He went back to his figures.

Mrs. McCoober seethed behind unshed tears of frustration. All the soft, protective padding of forgiveness fell away from the hard knot that now seemed calcified at the base of her throat. She bit back years of accrued harshness. Petty. Mean. Stingy. All, with silent embellishments, which, of course, he could not answer.

Since he had made a study of data from consumer groups, digests and reports, Mr. McCoober knew exactly which car he would buy. He wished two things, however. He wished that such a car were a product of His Country and that They had given it a more dignified name. But, putting the wheel base, turning radius, displacement, weight, gear ratio and cost all together, he concluded that this was the one car with all the right numbers. Besides, it required only one gallon of gas to

travel thirty-one miles on the highway, twenty-eight in the city. Those were figures a man could relish.

He made a careful debit from his savings account and a precise notation in his checkbook, polished the blue car until it glistened and drove to his auto dealer. Three hours later, he drove his new car home, after having tested the odometer and taken exact measure of the fuel. It was five and seven-tenths miles to his house and there were twelve gallons of gas in the tank. It was nine and eight-tenths to the store, which meant nineteen and six-tenths each day, which meant—well, he would of course, keep a constant check. The car pool, too, would show a larger profit. His cup, if not his gas tank, overflowed.

Each night, while dinner was being prepared, Mr. McCoober would enter his daily accounts. Mileage went into the little green "Automobile Log and Operating Expense Record" book. Each night, he would close it with a proud and loving pat. Watching him, Mrs. McCoober, who seldom received such a proud and loving pat, was inspired. Awesomely inspired with the perfect retaliation.

At the end of the first week, Mr. McCoober looked up from his green book. "I can't believe it," he beamed, "even better than the EPA. I've driven 113.7 miles and the tank is almost three-quarters full."

By the next Saturday, it was obvious that Mr. McCoober owned a phenomenal car. After another 108.2 miles, the gas gauge needle swung barely left of center. To make certain, he stopped at his gas station on the way to work Monday. He needed only six and one-tenth gallons. The calculations were astoundingly correct. The attendant marveled. The car pool marveled. Everyone in socks and shirts heard his incredible report. They marveled.

In two more weeks, Mr. McCoober was reporting an average of 59.4 miles per gallon from his magic automobile. There were, naturally, those incredulous few who challenged his findings. But, confronted with the precise ball-pointing in such a fine, neat hand, even the scoffers nodded their heads over the detailing of gallons, miles and dollars, each carried out to the proper tenth.

As enthusiastic and reputable witnesses, the car pool members encouraged him to take his findings back to the auto dealer, who made copies for the home office. Also, the dealer called the newspapers and television station.

"Nothing like a little free advertising," he thought.

Looking for relief from unpleasant weather and strike reports, the television station invited Mr. McCoober for an interview. He was

jovial and sweating during the fifty-three seconds.

"I believe people pick their own lemons," he confided to several thousand people. "I have a fine machine and I give it the best of care. I have records—"

"And how do you feel about your mileage, Mr. Hoover?"

"Coober. I mean McCoober. Good care and good records. Most people—"

"Thank you, Mr. McCurdle." The interview was closed.

The newspaper ran a vague picture of Mr. McCoober, but refused to show the remarkable car. He enjoyed near celebrity status. People stopped him in the store.

"Didn't I see you on TV? You're the fellow with the singing dog. Right?"

Mr. McCoober corrected them with patience, but he had Mrs. McCoober take three pictures of him standing with his hand on the unembellished hood of the smug little car. These he carried under a rubber band around the green book, which was losing its gilt letters. He would whip it out without being asked. He knew the numbers backwards. He basked and he beamed. Prouder than two and three-quarters peacocks, he felt charitable toward the name of his little car. Even.

One night when he was preparing charts to send off to *Motor and Man*, "The International Book of Records" and the Sunday supplements, Mrs. McCoober smiled to herself and went out to the garage.

There she took a can and a short length of garden hose from a high shelf and began to siphon off gas as quietly as she had been adding it each night. Just a little at a time, every night, done with considerable skill and relish.

Her smile broadened as she thought of the dismay in store for Mr. McCoober. Gleefully, she anticipated his anguish on reaching the four-miles-per-gallon mark. She wondered just when he would find it too shattering to continue setting down figures. She wondered if he would stop counting.

She put the can and hose back in their hiding place, stepped back from the little car and noted the date in a small green book of her own.

Into the Fire

Martha Zettlemoyer

Well, old gal, your momma always said you can't stay in the frying pan when you're yearning for the fire. Wonder how she knew. Wonder what she'd say if she saw what you're doing now. I know what she'd say. She'd say, "Baby, you should have listened to your momma." Well, Momma, can't say I'm not sorry, but you're right again, as usual. But what else was I supposed to do with Little Charlotte on the way and Lenny long gone to the oil fields or God knows where? After all, Eugene was right here.

I know, I know. I'm sorry a hundred times. God knows I've probably gotten mine and little Charlotte's things together ready to go at least that many times the past four years. Seems like a body'd get weary from all this folding and unfolding.

I still feel sick when I think about the last time Eugene was off helping his brothers work his folks' tobacco. I got everything packed and into the old Rambler wagon, got Charlotte gathered up and headed for the interstate. We'd barely gotten to the filling station before the exit when smoke came rolling out from under the hood so thick I couldn't see two feet in front of the car. Too bad that's as far as I got. I remember the guy at the station saying something about the radiator and his mechanic being gone for the day and where was I going and the best he could do was barely enough to get me back where I came from. "Texas would have to wait," he said, and "what on Earth is a gal like yourself going to do in Texas, anyway?" He sort of laughed and shrugged his shoulders. I gave him twenty dollars. Crawled the ten miles back home in second gear dragging my tail between my legs.

That was months ago. I won't have to go through that again, now that Eugene's got the Rambler in tip-top shape for the winter. He's so scared something's going to happen to little Charlotte and I'll have to get into town in a hurry. For once his cautious ways are going to pay off.

Now quit thinking such thoughts about your husband. It's just uncharitable, that's what it is. Eugene is a good and decent man. He's worked this God-forsaken fistful of rock and clay into a real farm. He raises the finest dark tobacco for counties around. He's been such a devoted father, no one would ever guess he wasn't Charlotte's real Daddy. She surely adores her Daddy.

Daddy, Daddy. If she could only know her real Daddy she'd know what stuff she was made of. When gets older she wouldn't have to look at Eugene's dull brown eyes and pale red hair and wonder where she got those baby blues and that headful of chocolate curls.

I swear sometimes I believe I carried something that was all Lenny's and none of mine. I wouldn't be surprised if it was so. I used to melt when I got near all that power and spirit that was his. I still get quiet and quiver a little when he comes to mind. I've been quiet and trembly most of the time here lately. Eugene has noticed it, too. He just smiles sadly and abides it. He figures it'll pass in time. It always has.

But it won't pass this time. I've got to get Charlotte her real Daddy and me a real man if I have to search every oil field in Texas. And if that doesn't work I'll ransack every pool hall and redneck bar from here to California. I've got to. I'll just bust open if I don't get out of here. I don't love Eugene. He knew that when we agreed to marry. It just wouldn't be fair to him if I stayed. He thought in time I'd come to love him the way he loves me. I used to pray to God I could. But I find myself hating him more and more every day. I hate him looking at me with teary eyes and knowing that he wants me. He knows I hate it and it hurts him so much he's almost quit trying. Lately I hate even being in the same bed with him. I hate him for not being Lenny.

Oh, God, what a cruel animal you have created in me! I know Eugene is a man—a good, kind man. He can't help it that he's not Lenny. It's just not in his power to make my skin hum and my chest well up and my heart beat so fast I think I'm going to explode. It's not his fault he didn't get those big blue-ocean eyes of Lenny's that lap away at you like the waves on the beach. I'm sure he would have asked his Mother for those big black curls and that deep chest and those thick steel arms if he thought asking would do any good.

Okay. Get a hold of yourself. Time? What's the time? Almost four. Charlotte will be up from her nap soon and hungry. All that's left to do is get supper and wait for Eugene to call. Got to put his mind at ease. He'll be calling soon to ask if it's okay if he stays over at his Mother's for the night. Let's see. . .they're stripping today. What will it be this time? I know. The work hasn't gone as fast as they expected. They would have to work well into the evening and start early in the morning if they could hope to help Eugene work up his tobacco the rest of the week. He knows it's a two day job but he never makes plans to stay. I could have been halfway to Texas by now. Oh –the phone—

"Hello?

"Yes, we're fine. Charlotte is just waking up from her nap. How's the work going?

"Well, I guess you'll be having to work well into this evening, then?

"Yes, sure. Besides, no sense in driving all the way across county just to get up at the crack of dawn and go right back.

"Yes, you're right. It will do your poor Mother's heart good to have all her boys back around the supper table and for an overnight. Besides, you'd enjoy the visit. You see them so seldom these days.

"You know I don't mind. I understand.

"Of course, we'll be alright. Don't worry.

"Yes, there's plenty of gas in the Rambler.

"Okay. I'll look for you all tomorrow afternoon, then.

"You too. Bye."

1980

For Zach; The Pitter Poet

Martha Parks

You collect unicorns.
(A mythical beast led astray by virgins.)
You, my friend are like the creature
    that you collect.
You are born out of your time –
    led astray by virginal innocence,
(Your own innocence.)
    into a world you cannot handle.
    You like the unicorn,
will perish.
  Only to be understood by those
    who care for mythical
                mixed-up beasts.

The Memoirs of a Grande Dame

Michael Lynn Harris

"I knew I was destined to be great, and so I was. I was simply too original for mediocrity. As a child, I often heard adults exclaim over my beauty. Other children, out of jealousy, detested me. The feeling was quite mutual."

Eugenia Lefort was as celebrated for her lack of accomplishments as for her beauty. She could not sew, bake, sing, draw, or do anything useful, although she liked to tat yards and yards of quite hideous lace. But of course, with her face *and* her fortune, such accomplishments were unnecessary. It would have been quite ostentatious and vulgar to be talented or intelligent in addition to the gifts of beauty and fortune.

"From the time I was fourteen years old, men flung themselves at me, in the hopes that I would choose to be their bride. Many a gallant swain wept or rejoiced over my inattention or a sign of my favor. I filled many a seat and emptied many a flower stall when I ventured to the theatre or the opera. I was an object of worship and the cause of many duels."

As soon as her father discreetly spread the news that she would come into an immense fortune upon marrying, Eugenia was swamped with offers of matrimony and things of a less spiritual nature, also. She caused such a rush at the Folies Bergere that the show was delayed for almost ten minutes (although it was rumored that the leading lady's corset was the actual cause of the delay). The same thing occurred when she attended the legitimate theatre, also. When she expressed a dislike for the music while attending the opera, one of her beaux convinced the conductor to play Viennese waltzes, which quite put out the diva and most of the rest of the company.

And what a round of parties and balls! Hardly a week went by that her father didn't give one or the other. None of the young women about Paris would attend, so Eugenia never

lacked for dancing partners, so she didn't care.

"Then came the day that I met that man who would eventually become the late M. Duval. I had just married for the third time. Louis was the half-brother of my new husband, by marriage. He was rumored to be the love child of both parents, who were married to one another at the time. Our affair was idyllic."

Louis Duval was the most ordinary man in Paris—so ordinary, that he was almost a paragon of monotony. His idea of an exciting adventure was discovering that he had worn two different-colored stockings, but Eugenia was blind to his faults. After three marriages, she was ready for love. She was nineteen years old and quite innocent concerning affairs of the heart. Her first two husbands died of heart attacks at the receptions following their weddings, but they had lived full lives, and at their ages, no one was especially surprised. Her third husband, brother of Louis, spent his wedding night with a maid, three wedding guests, and a girl he picked up on the way back from the church. He was then hospitalized for exhaustion, which, at his age, was to be expected.

Louis had neither looks, charm, nor influential connections. Eugenia found him to be a fascinating man and a stimulating match for her in intellectual pursuits.

"M. Duval and I spent our time patronizing art. Louis had exquisite taste and I learned to trust his judgment implicitly."

With the aide of M. Duval, Eugenia began to collect hand painted souvenir ashtrays and little pink statues of Cupid waving banners which read "Amour" or "Je Vous Aime!" She would tat lace frames for original prints by such illustrious artists as Issac Putz, whose greatest successes were the illustrations he did for a series of unsuccessful children's books about a vapid, blonde, blue-eyed girl named Eugenia (she also patronized writers). The books were never published.

"I feel that I have lived a gaily eventful life and I have few, if any, regrets. I have had love and marriage, tragedy and happiness, sickness (she once had a cold after waiting in the rain

for a rendezvous with Louis. She waited twelve hours in the same spot because she thought he had meant ten *a*.m.) and health, good luck and bad, pain and pleasure, war and peace, pride and prejudice, power, and glory," *et cetera*.

Eugenia has earned her place in the obscurity of history. She outlived seven husbands (although it is rumored that one merely skipped the country with the paste copies of Eugenia's jewel collection, which she kept in the vault "so they wouldn't wear out.") And of course, one died in the middle of the marriage ceremony, so one may use one's discretion in whether to count him or not.) She had no children, although she had many step-children. Fortunately, her memoirs, the only record of her existence, were edited from the original 1327 pages to the form in which you find them here, before they were tragically (and accidentally, I'm sure) discarded with the editor's gin bottles.

Au Revoir!

1981

Dangerous Curves
A Gothic Parody

Michael Lynn Harris

The first time I saw the moss-covered stones of Snively Castle, I felt a strange mixture of exhilaration and nausea in the pit of my stomach, although I could not have known what terrible and degrading things would occur to me within its dank walls and courtyards. I was to be governess to Lord Snively's two children, Geoffrey and Arachnidia. How strange are the twists of Fate! I was born into two of England's most illustrious families, through both of my parents. Unfortunately, they were disowned because they were in love with each other and affianced to each other's siblings. Luckily, my father was able to sell my mother's jewelry to support his gambling habit, so we lived comfortably until they were carried off by influenza, but let's not dwell on that now. I was left with only my wardrobe full of ball gowns and two pieces of jewelry—a diamond-and-ruby encrusted bracelet and one matching earring. I could never part with them, for they were all that were left of my parents' estate.

As the carriage had halted, I assumed that we had reached our destination. I gathered my parcels together, but before I could open the door, the handsomest man I had ever seen opened it and jumped in.

I screamed in terror. He had the grace to look taken aback before he spoke. "I'm dreadfully sorry. I had no idea that this carriage was occupied. Please leave at once."

When I had finally regained the use of my vocal facilities, I said haughtily, "I am the governess for little Geoffrey and dear little Arachnidia. Now, if you don't mind, would you kindly introduce yourself?"

He looked at me with his soulful grey eyes, which were deep-set above is aquiline nose and thin, cruel lips, and said to me, "I could never introduce myself kindly, for I am your pupil, little Geoffrey."

I am quite sure that my shock showed on my face.

"I was under the impression that my charges were small children. I simply do not know what to do! I suppose I should introduce myself properly. I am Philodendra Brendon Devon Clive. I expect you to be able to write in cursive and to be able to multiply up to five times seven. That is as far as I am able to go, so it will have to suffice."

"You may be prepared to teach me the rudiments of grammar

and mathematics, but what do you know of love?" Then he flung himself at me quite passionately.

Suddenly, someone opened the door of the carriage and I screamed again. This time the intruder was an exceptionally beautiful girl of seventeen. Her hair was long and golden although at present it was hidden under a rather ugly, although obviously expensive, hat.

Geoffrey turned to me quite gallantly under the circumstances, and said, "Allow me to introduce my illegitimate half-sister, Guinivere Alice Smirch. It isn't polite to speak to her in public, but just among ourselves, she acn be rather pleasant company."

I must say I was dumb-founded and appalled! For him to actually present this female to me was a social outrage and an insult to all women of good breeding. I started to turn away from the wretched girl, so she would realize she would get no encouragement from me, when I simply had to scream again.

The handsomest man I had ever seen opened the carriage door and crawled inside. He shook his tousled, curly, dark hair and gazed at me with piercing, melancholy blue eyes, and yet, when he spoke, he addressed Geoffrey.

"Good, I've found you at last. How many will there be for supper?"

Geoffrey snarled back at him, "Why don't you set an extra place at the *family* table for the pretty new governess."

"Really, Geoffrey, one shouldn't use the adjective 'pretty', when 'fairly' or 'rather' would modify 'new governess' much better!" Even though we had only just been introduced, I felt that I should not shirk my duties. "One must not be colloquial."

He turned to me with a strange look on his face. "Permit me to introduce you to my illegitimate half-brother, Jeffrey Smirch. He works a sour butler, but I despise him for he is my only rival for inheriting my father's fortune, and he puts too much starch in my shirts!"

"But surely that is the fault of the laundress."

"Jeffrey *is* the laundress."

What a strange household, and I had not even descended from the carriage yet! Once more I prepared to get out and once more I felt compelled to scream, but I stifled the urge. This time it was another young woman, also exceptionally beautiful, in a rather swarthy way. She wore a wet black lace dressing gown, for it had begun to rain. She spoke.

"There you are Jeffrey. Why didn't you come help me get

dressed for dinner?" She had such a feverish look in her eyes that I feared that she might be consumptive. I also deduced that Jeffrey's duties must include those of a lady's maid.

"Why, you must be dear little Arachnidia!" I called gaily. "I am your new governess, Philodendra Brendon Devon Clive."

"Can you sew?"

"Why, no! But I am sure you could teach me!"

"Oh, damn! I need a gown to wear to the ball tonight. I simply can't wear the dress that Jeffrey made for me. It's too—white."

Such a high spirited girl! I was sure that she would be a problem, but I endeavored to be friendly.

"I'm sure that I could lend you something. I have *scads* of ball gowns!"

Geoffrey turned on me in a fury. "How dare you use a word like that in front of my sister! I think perhaps you should be discharged."

Oddly enough, Arachnidia herself came to my aid.

Don't be so hasty, Geoffrey. Let me see her wardrobe first."

"Well, then," I announced in a brisk manner, "why don't we all go inside, so I can unpack my trunk. I brought you both a present!"

A sudden, horrible thought occurred to me. I had brought nothing for Jeffrey or Guinivere! Of course, they weren't legitimate, but one must not antagonize the servants, especially when one of them might inherit the Earl's estate.

Soon, we were all established in my chamber—a dank, musty smelling room at the top of a winding staircase. I assumed that it was a tower room, for it was round. Only one thing bothered me about the room; there was only one window and it was barred. I strode impetuously across the room and peered out. What I saw there caused me to scream in terror, causing Geoffrey and Jeffrey to drop my trunk on Guinivere Alice's foot.

"What the devil—" began Jeffrey, when Geoffrey cut him off.

"It is quite obvious that Philodendra Devon has seen—a mouse," he said with a sneer.

"You forgot the Brendon, and it was no mouse! It was a beautiful girl—quite the most beautiful girl I have ever seen! She had gorgeous, rich brown hair, worn in a snood, and she was wearing an earring just like mine! She was wearing a blue traveling cloak with brass buttons and a stain on the collar!"

Guinivere and Arachnidia exchanged a startled glance. They

obviously recognized the woman whom I described. I heard Arachnidia mutter something about a "crazy woman" and Guinivere, in a protesting manner, said, "Don't jump to conclusions. She's probably just intoxicated." There was apparently a crazed alcoholic prowling around the castle! But why was Guinivere Alice protecting her?

My revery was interrupted by Geoffrey. He looked at me with a mixture of passion and cynicism and announced, "Father would like to see you before the ball tonight. We will leave you now. Be ready promptly at seven. Do you know how to dance?"

When I answered in the affirmative, he turned and left, along with Jeffrey and Guinivere. Arachnidia held back for a moment, as I removed my blue traveling cloak.

"What will you wear tonight, Philodendra?"

"I thought I might wear my black satin gown with the low neckline, but I would be grateful for your opinion. Which gown do you think I should wear?"

"Let me see." She clawed her way through my trunk until she found a blue and white checked Bo Peep costume which I had once worn to a fancy-dress ball. With a cry of triumph, she pulled it out.

"Why, this is simply perfect! It's *you* all over!"

Obviously, the poor girl had no knowledge of fashion. She showed a pitiable lack of taste and breeding in her choice of clothing, but I endeavored to humour her.

"Don't be an utter idiot, Arachnidia! This is quite the ugliest gown in my collection. This yellow and pink plaid is much more becoming, and I wouldn't allow my worst enemy to be caught dead in it, even though my own sainted mother made it, herself."

"But I would like to see you in the blue and white dress. Please Philodendra! I might want one like it."

To humor her, I put on the entire costume, including the wig. I was looking for the shepherd's staff, when Arachnidia screamed.

"Quickly! We must flee! The ghost is coming!"

I fled madly from the room. As soon as I reached the door, it slammed and locked behind me. I heard maniacal laughter emanating from the room. Poor Arachnidia! I continued to flee through the castle, searching for help.

I searched through endless dark corridors. I feared that I would be too late to help Arachnidia, but I could no longer find my way back to my room, so I kept on. Finally, I saw a light gleaming under a door ahead of me. Thankfully, I rushed toward it.

In answer to my timid knock, a quavery old voice called, "Come in, dear!"

I opened the creaking door and stepped cautiously within. Not two feet inside, I was assaulted from behind. I whirled around. There stood the oldest, most lecherous man I had ever seen.

"Well, I'm glad to see you're prompt. How about a little fun before we go to the party?"

"Sir, I am not here for fun. Your daughter is even now being molested by a fearsome ghost in my chamber!"

That brought a response from him.

"Which daughter?"

"Arachnidia."

"In that case, God have pity on the ghost. If you didn't come here for fun, why are you dressed like that?"

"I was entertaining Arachnidia when the ghost attacked us. What did you want to see me about?"

"About a little fun. Since you won't play, go get dressed for the ball."

I gratefully left his presence and finally found my way back to my room.

The door was wide open and gowns were scattered everywhere. There was no sign of Arachnidia. I prayed that she had been spared, but I feared the worst. Nonetheless, I had a job to do, so I squared my shoulders and dressed for the ball.

What can I say of the events which followed? If I could have foreseen them, would the evening have been any different? Would I have changed anything, had it been within my power? Or were we locked within the mad machinations of Fate? Could it have been preordained that the events of that evening *had* to occur? Who knows?

I wore a tasteful gown of ivory silk which looked quite stunning, even without any jewelry other than my earring and my bracelet. I carefully made my way to the ballroom, searching for signs of Arachnidia or the ghost, but I found nothing.

When I entered the ballroom, I paused at the top of the staircase which swept down to the dance floor. Jeffrey, in a very flattering butler's uniform, announced my name.

"Miss Philodendra Brendon Devon Clive!" The sound echoed in the deafening silence which followed as I gazed over the room. I then descended the stairs into the room, still in total silence. I was so mortified that I stopped in the middle of the room and called to Jeffrey.

"When do you think the other guests will arrive? I hope I am not too early."

"They should begin to arrive momentarily." He glanced out into the hall and then raced to my side. "Philodendra, from the moment that I saw you, I knew that we were destined to fall in love. Marry me, and we shall experience eternal bliss."

"Please, Jeffrey, don't be so impetuous! Even though you are second in line to your father's fortune, you are still of illegitimate birth and therefore a social inferior to me. A man in your station cannot hope to marry a young woman of any social standing whatsoever. You must remember your place in life. I know that you are heartbroken, now, but in the future, you will be grateful to me for putting you in your place. You may now go and live your life in humble devotion to me, possibly joining a religious order or the merchant marines, and remain, eternally faithful in your love for me."

"Then you will not marry me under any condition?"

"Only if you can change your social standing! Where is your legitimate brother, Geoffrey?"

With a snarl, he leaped away from me. Such mercurial moods! I am not sure that I could be happy with such a fickle person, even if he were a social equal to me! At that moment, the guests began to arrive.

I was not without partners the entire evening. When I was not dancing, I was surrounded by a dazzling array of men. In the middle of one waltz, I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned to see Lord Snively motioning for me to follow him off the floor. Reluctantly, I did so.

He led me to a settee beside a potted palm and we sat down.

"My dear, I have some wonderful news for you. Your grandmother is here tonight, and she has decided to acknowledge you as her heiress."

It was too wonderful to be believed!

"I am to inherit her entire fortune?"

"No, I was jesting! Heh, heh!" He continued to laugh until a coughing fit caused his face to turn quite blue. In alarm, I slapped him on the back and dislodged his teeth, but he ceased coughing.

"In truth," he said when he regained his faculties, "your grandmother *is* here, but I do not know what she wants with you. Will you meet me outside by the fountain?"

"It is raining out by the fountain."

"Well, it isn't raining in my room!"

"Don't be absurd. Which one is my grandmother?"

"She is the one wearing one earring and a matching bracelet."

"*I* am wearing one earring and a matching bracelet!"

"Well, hers match yours. Now go away so I can proposition that little blonde over there."

I searched the room for a lady wearing jewelry matching mine, but she was nowhere to be seen. I finally found her out by the fountain with Lord Snively.

"Confound it, girl! Won't you let me have *any* fun?"

"Grandmother!" I cried as I flung myself into her arms.

"Well, I should say you might have better timing! You waited all of your life to come to see me, and then you have to interrupt me in the middle of a tryst! Why don't you go wait for me in the carriage?"

"Yes, Grandmother." I couldn't say more, for the emotions I was experiencing choked the words in my throat. I went back to the ball, to say goodbye to the Snivelys and the Smirches.

There, I found Arachnidia wearing *my* black gown—the one she said *I* shouldn't wear! I was at a loss for words. Suddenly, Jeffrey was at my side.

"That's gratitude for you! I worked like a dog on the white dress for her, and she wears the first thing that comes along!"

He could even sew! I looked at him with new eyes. Here was a true gem of a servant. I would see if Grandmother would hire him, for I would need an accomplished dress-maker now that I was to enter society.

I saw Geoffrey across the room at that moment. I went over to say my farewells to him. When he understood that I would be leaving, and that I was an heiress, he seemed quite startled.

"That changes a lot of things! Darling, will you marry me?"

At *that* moment, Lord Snively called out that he had an announcement to make. Everyone gathered around to hear. He held my grandmother's hand, right there in public, but we dismissed that breach of etiquette because of their ages.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, Sally and I would like to announce our engagement to be married."

"Grandmother, what will Grandfather say?"

"Not much, I should hope. He's been dead for twenty-five years."

"I had no idea! What a relief! We shall all be so happy!"

Lord Snively cleared his throat. "I have one more announcement—I have decided to declare my legitimate son as my heir."

I turned to the crowd. "I, too, have an announcement to make. I am marrying him!"

Geoffrey leaped into my arms. "My own Philodendra!"

"My own—" but Lord Snively interrupted me.

"Unhand that girl! How dare you embrace another man's fiancée, in public?"

I looked at him in shock as Jeffrey leaped into my arms and said, "My own Philodendra!"

"Hold on a minute. Let me get this straight. You declared your legitimate son as heir; he is my fiancé. Yet you say that Geoffrey *isn't* your heir—Jeffrey is." Lord Snively nodded. "I am confused."

"It is rather simple. When my legitimate children were born, I switched them with Geoffrey and Arachnidia so they wouldn't be spoiled and useless. How many earls do you know that are skilled dress-makers?"

"Jeffrey, my own!"

Geoffrey rather sullenly interrupted. "Where does that leave us?"

My grandmother broke in. "My Dear Geoffrey, you are *my* grandchildren. Cousins to my dear Philodendra."

"My dear cousins!"

We all embraced. It was so emotional that I am not sure that I did not almost cry. To be acknowledged, affianced, and propositioned in one evening is almost too much for anyone to bear.

It soon came to pass that we were all married to the proper individuals. We have continued to live in great happiness. The years have brought me two beautiful children—a son, Jeffrey Geoffrey Smirch-Snively and my daughter, Philodendra Brendon Devon Clive Guinivere Arachnidia Alice Smirch-Snively. Of course, there are many mysteries of those early days which will never be solved, such as the beautiful girl outside the tower window, and the fearsome ghost which has continued to plague Arachnidia when she and I are alone, but I feel that I can cope with these things, today, for I am convinced that, ultimately, Love conquers all.

1982

Legacy

Tom Wallace

The graves are now covered with grass.
From the mountains to the wind-swept plains
flowers bend before the tombstones.
Each one with a question on its lips.
"Why? Why? A thousand times. Why?"
But, the graves are silent.
No answers are forthcoming.
Perhaps there are none.
But, a generation was shattered.
Its blood splattered from the Delta
to the DMZ.
A nation was ripped apart.
An arrow pierced its very heart
saying "Stop, Stop, no more can I bear to see."
Still it went on.
Still it went on.
Until the war in Saigon gave birth
to the war in Chicago.
And the fighting spread from Hamburger Hill
to Lincoln Park.
The names of Ho Chi Minh and Richard Daley were on everyone's tongue.
Bitter confrontations beneath a weeping flag.
Our collective souls beginning to sag under the weight of a television war with a rock-n-roll soundtrack.
Don't look back.
Don't look back.
For if you do then you're doomed to see
that freedom doesn't make you free.
And just when the Pentagon's PR men tell you
everything is great.
Four dead at Kent State.

Helter Skelter
Gimme Shelter.
More blood running in our own streets.
So that a generation begun in Camelot
ends in Dante's Inferno.
But, what about the graves?
The keepers of our victims.
Solitary and silent.
Who will speak for them?
And what is their legacy?
Is it Pleiku or Woodstock?
Bob Dylan or Kate Smith?
Jane Fonda or John Wayne?
Napalm or Mescaline?
Which end of the pole truly represents them?
And in their journey through the afterlife
how do they view us?
Do they see us as tragic victims like they are?
If they do then they're not wrong.
For each one of us has died a little bit.
Each one of us has been in a war.
For as the writer has said,
"Viet Nam, Viet Nam, we have all been there."

1982

Dachau

Greg Kliewer

bloody soil crusted over
by aimless passages
of laboratory time
into therapeutic scabs
of scattered gray gravel
mined from a once-in-time
jewish industrialist's quarry.
black and white photos
of colorless limbs
posing unclothed;
crumpled and twisted,
wrenched into death,
pornographic gestures
totally exposed—
even wearing no skin
they're naked to the bone.
their stench I resist
like that of rancid scaled fish
which I toss to the mess
in my stowaway closet
beneath where I keep
all my grade school photographs,
photos of me smiling
and in shoes.
shoes,
shoes, shoes, shoes and more shoes:
cotton laces, leather tongues,
rubber soles
and all unstrung?
white plaster room
plastered full of just shoes—
the one is so full,

the many are so empty;
death is filled,
life has become empty.
barefooted children walk in my memory
led by the hand of their trusted mother
to fiery furnaces
stoked with coals of hell.
spansions of chicken fence,
a mansion of steel stretched
to the four cornered earth,
tightens its grip to catch
as in a game of red-rover
the bullet heavy head
just sent over
by zARATHUSTRA;
defeated
it slips slowly
through the dirty barbed fingers
and hits the bloody clay ground
with the dull lifeless sound of a tired cannon ball
onto a burlap sandbag wall.
dachau, meine liebe frau!
dachau, its vowels are weighty.
dachau, meine liebe frau!
though its memories are waning
still its message lingers on
behind the weeping garden walls.
pow! pow! pow!
listening to the children play
their innocent games
in my backyard;
dachau! dachau! dachau!

like the spitfire machine guns
in the pitch black of night
chasing our eyeballs
'till they silence our flight;
dachau! dachau! frau!
dachau! dachau! dachau!
DACHAU DACHAU CACHAU DAcHAu daCHaU
dAchaU
dachAu dachau dachau dachau dachauda chau—
cachaudachaucadhauhaducaudhcadcadacahuda—
~~dausehdachuaseachaudehaueadhauchedaeua—~~
Shall wE eVEr esCapE auF dIesEm n_{Ac}Ht?

1983

Kallie

Shirley Holzapfel

By the time Kallie left home for work she was already exhausted. Driving in through the rush-hour traffic, she went over in her mind what had already happened that morning. It started out as usual, with the clock radio going off at 6:00. She lay there for five more minutes getting used to the idea of being awake, then got up and took a shower and, as always, had to wipe the steam accumulation off the bathroom mirror so she could see how to put on her makeup. She applied her usual creams and things that she used to make herself presentable each day. At some point between the mascara and the cheek blush, she paused, looking at herself in the mirror and thinking, "This is probably at least the 5,000th time I've done this. Why do I go through this ritual every morning of my life? Who wrote the rules for 'presentable'? Brainwashed," she thought, "by the TV jingles," although when she tried to think of an advertisement and the product that went with it, she couldn't match anything. Well, something had influenced her to spend so much time each morning getting ready to face the world. "Peer pressure, maybe—at my age?" The thought made her smile. She had always associated that sort of thing with high school and teen-agers. Anyway, whatever it was, she didn't have time to figure it out now. She had to get breakfast and wake her two sons so they'd get to school on time.

She started into her son Robbie's bedroom when she heard a loud rattling noise and then a crash outside the window. She knew what it was. The neighbor's dog had turned over the garbage can again and was scattering trash everywhere. "Damn," Kallie said, and ran to the backdoor and opened it, and said a few choice words to the dog as she threw her bedroom slipper at it. The dog went off yelping as if he'd been beaten, and its owner stuck his head out his backdoor and hollered at Kallie to leave his dog alone. Kallie didn't say any of the ugly little things she felt like saying. She just picked up her shoe and went back into the house.

The boys still weren't up, and Kallie said loudly in her most exasperated voice, "It's nearly 7:00 o'clock; get up at once."

Phil, her youngest son, came stumbling into the kitchen rubbing his eyes and yawning. "Mom, I want doughnuts for breakfast," he said.

"Phil, go wash the sleep out of your eyes, and we don't have any doughnuts. They're not good for you anyway. You should eat cereal or toast—something nutritional."

Their conversation went from bd to worse, so Kallie left the room before they both said things they'd regret. She went into the bedroom where her husband L. T. was just getting out of bed, and he said in his husky early morning voice, "What are you two arguing about so early?"

For a minute Kallie hated him for not being the one to get up and get breakfast, and fight with the neighbors and their dog, and argue with their sons over food and Lord knows what else. She didn't answer him, but went into the bathroom and brushed her teeth so hard she hurt her mouth.

When the boys finally left for school and L. T. went off to work, Kallie cleared the table and put the dishes into the dishwasher, thinking, "They aren't even capable of doing that for themselves." She looked around once to make sure everything that should be was turned off or unplugged, then she picked up her sweater, locked the door and walked out to the car. When she turned the key in the ignition, she got mad all over again. L. T. had left her the car with the empty tank. She didn't have time to stop for gas. She'd just have to pry there was enough to get her to work.

"Had all this happened this morning between 6:00 and 8:00? How could so much have gone wrong in two little hours? What am I doing wrong?" she wondered as she parked the car and got her key to the office out of her purse.

There were two customers already waiting when she opened the door—crabby old Mrs. Carver with her little white poodle, with pink ribbons in its hair, tucked under her arm. "Ugh," Kallie said to herself. She had never liked that fidgety little mutt, and she knew the feeling was mutual. She swore to L. T. that it sneered at her, from under Mrs. Carver's arm, every time she saw it.

Mrs. Carver came in twice a week, every week, without fail. She came in one day to leave cleaning to be done, and bright and early the next day she came to pick it up, and to complain about one thing and another. Today it was her shirts. "One of these has too much starch and the other one doesn't have enough," she said.

Kallie thought, "Oh, damn, just what I need first thing in the

morning," but she swallowed hard, made her voice pleasant and said, "They were starched together, Mrs. Carver. Look at the labels; one is 100% cotton and the other is a cotton blend. The cotton one absorbed more starch than the blend."

"Well, what can you do about it?" demanded Mrs. Carver.

"What would you like us to do?" asked Kallie.

"How about doing them again and leaving off the starch entirely."

"Wonderful idea," Kallie said, and tagged the shirts for NO STARCH. Mrs. Carver left with her dog, smiling as if she was satisfied that she had handled that just right, and the other customer stepped up to the counter. Kallie had caught a glimpse of him while he was standing behind Mrs. Carver and thought he looked vaguely familiar. He was a big, tall, broad-shouldered guy with blonde hair, in his late thirties, Kallie guessed. He had his hands stuck in the pockets of the red and black plaid jacket he was wearing. Automatically, Kallie thought, "XXL shirt." She said, "Can I help you?"

The man took his left hand out of his pocket and put a neatly folded brown paper bag on the counter and said, "Yes, take all of the money out of the cash drawer and put it in this bag," in a shaky voice that he seemed to be trying to control. All this time he had not taken his hand from his right pocket, and now he pointed that hand, pocket and all, straight at her.

Something snapped inside Kallie's head. "This is the last straw," she remembered thinking, just before she picked up the first thing she saw, which was her purse she had hastily thrown on the shelf under the counter. She hit him across the face with it as hard as she could. It made a dull cracking sound as it hit, and all Kallie could think was, "I've broken my sunglasses." For a few seconds—while time seemed to stand still—they looked at each other in stunned silence. Then Kallie began to scream. The man was frightened; she could see it in his eyes. His nose was bleeding from the blow. He grabbed the bag from the counter and hurriedly tried to get out the door, pushing instead of pulling, and it wouldn't go. It was one of those doors that now are prohibited by the fire codes, but this place had been built long before OSHA and safety regulations for buildings had been established. When the door wouldn't open, the man became even more panicky and tried to break the glass with his fist, until he seemed to realize in an instant what he was doing wrong, and pulled the door open and ran.

Kallie couldn't stop screaming. She was still on the verge when

the police arrived. Together, the two officers tried to get her calmed. They sat her down and put a cup of coffee in her hands, and after she had had some of the coffee, Officer Monroe asked her if she felt steady enough to fill out a report. She gave them a description of the man and what had happened.

"Do you know him?"

"No—yes, I mean I've seen him before somewhere." And then, "Light starch, top button missing, folded."

The officers looked worriedly at one another and one of them said, "She's getting hysterical again."

"No, no I'm not, I just remembered that he brought shirts in once a long time ago, and he requested light starch and that they be folded instead of on hangers. The top button was missing on each one and had to be replaced. I can't remember his name. It must have been eight or nine months ago. I'm sure we don't have a record of it now, because we don't keep paid tickets that long."

"Do you know what kind of gun he had?"

"I never saw a gun, but he certainly made me believe he had one when he pointed that pocket at my head."

"Tell us what you can about the other customer; a Mrs. Carter, did you say?"

"No, **Carver**. Clara Carver. She comes in twice a week, every week, since I can remember—once to bring in her cleaning to be done, and the next morning to pick it up."

Kallie gave them a description—short, pudgy, sixtyish, grey hair, wears house dresses and low-heeled shoes. "She always has her nervous little dog under her arm, and she always complains about something." Kallie had no idea where she lived, but promised to find out when she came back to pick up her shirts.

The police officers gave her a number to call if she should remember anything else and said they'd be in touch.

Kallie seriously contemplated not telling anyone else about the incident. It was like a bad dream now and she just wanted to start forgetting about it. But she decided she'd have to tell her family, because somebody would, and besides, they might even read it in the newspaper, even though the police promised to keep it as quiet as possible. "Publicity like that seems to bring out more of those nuts intent on pulling similar stunts," they agreed.

At dinner time the boys wanted to know every detail, and were really a little awed to their Mom had been involved in a real hold-up,

however bungled. "Gee, Mom, you could have been shot," Robbie said, and Phil said, "Yeah, Mom, you could have been killed." L. T. could see Kallie's agitation and said, "Now, that's enough. Your Mom's had a hectic day." Then to lighten her mood, "You don't want your Mom to hit you with her purse, do you?"

Kallie had nightmares that night. She dreamed Mrs. Carver's poodle was wearing a red and black plaid jacket and was up on the counter tearing all the top buttons off a pile of shirts. She woke up suddenly and couldn't get back to sleep, so she went to the den to watch TV. The early, early news was on and the newscaster was reporting a story about a woman's body that had been found in a field outside of town. She had not yet been identified. "Thank goodness there was nothing about my little episode," Kallie thought.

The next thing she knew, Phil was shaking her. "Mom, wake up. What are you doing on the couch? I woke up and heard the TV and thought we had a burglar."

"What time is it?" Kallie said with alarm.

"It's just a little past six. And Mom, it doesn't matter if we don't have any doughnuts. I'm having cereal this morning." Kallie had to smile.

On her way to work that morning, Kallie remembered that Mrs. Carver would be in to pick up her shirts, and she didn't want to forget to ask her where she lived and to give her the number the police had left. Kallie wondered how Mrs. Carver would react to that. "She will probably be pleased to have someone else to talk to," she thought. Kallie suspected that the biggest reason Mrs. Carver came in every week was to talk. Apparently she had no one else she could complain to, or at least no one who would listen.

By noon, when Kallie went to lunch, Mrs. Carver had not been in. Because Kallie had a lot to do in the office, she walked up town and got a quick sandwich at the corner drugstore. While she was gulping down her chicken salad, she began to get an uneasy feeling that someone was watching her, but when she turned to look she seemed to see a quick flash of movement, like lightning during a spring storm that comes and goes so fast that you're not positive you've seen it until it happens two or three times. Only this was a blur of red and black and she did not see it again. "It's my imagination," she told herself. "I'm beginning to see red and black in everything now," and she told herself not to be so foolish. When she got back to the office, Mrs. Carver still had not been in, and Kallie began to get a queasy sensation in her stomach, like something was terribly wrong. Still she tried to talk herself into forgetting it. "Don't be silly," she said to herself, "you know plenty of people leave their cleaning for months before they come back to get it." But Mrs. Carver never had.

And the end of the day, Kallie phoned Officer Monroe and told him about Mrs. Carver. He told her not to worry, "A number of situations ould have come up," and "let's give her at least a week before we go looking for her," he said kindly. But in a week Mrs. Carver had not come in, and then two weeks and then two months.

The police had no leads as to the whereabouts of the would-be robber. Kallie had looked through the mug books at police headquarters but had seen no one who resembled him. The police artist drew a sketch from her description, but so far there had been no response from it. It was as if he had vanished from the face of the earth. Kallie hoped he had.

L. T. urged Kallie to tell the police about what she thought she saw at the drugstore. She didn't want to; it sounded stupid now, but at L. T.'s insistence she did. The officers' reactions were about what hers had been after it was over, except they didn't have that nagging, apprehensive feeling they couldn't get rid of.

Thanksgiving came and went and the Christmas holidays weren't too far off, and in the busy excitement of all that, Kallie forgot about the blonde-haired man and Mrs. Carver, except for when she'd notice Mrs. Carver's shirts still hanging on the conveyer. She didn't know what else to do with them, so she let them hang. Then, after a while, they became so familiar that she just didn't consciously see them anymore.

One afternoon the telephone rang. It was Kallie's good friend, Liz, calling to see if they couldn't go shopping together. Kallie was delighted. She hadn't seen Liz for a long time now, and she really needed to get some things for Christmas. Liz wanted to find a blazer for her husband, and Kallie had several things she wanted to price at the jewelry store. So, after they drove up town and parked the car, they separated after agreeing to meet again in one hour at the Rathskeller where they'd have a bite to eat.

Kallie was caught up in the holiday mood as she walked up the street with all the other shoppers. The air was nippy but not really cold for December, and it was a good night for shopping. As she anticipated just exactly what she would buy if the prices weren't too exorbitant, she felt happier than she had for a long time. Then she saw him. He was

walking toward her in the crowd, and because he was so tall, she saw him before he saw her. He had on the same black and red plaid jacket, but this time he didn't have his hands in his pockets. Instead, under his arm, he carried a little white poodle with pink ribbons in its hair.

1983

Migrant Workers

Joe Bolton

Darkly gold and hung in mist,
they're up before the sun,
dragging their dew-soaked clothes
through high weeds toward a field
where strawberries are learning
what redness requires:
light. Women and children
stay drifting among the gray
triangles of their tents
that lean into the sky.

1984
Lady of the Bell Jar
Elaine Ayers

How did she write that poem,
so close to the sting of death
that she could hear the hum
of killer bees?
How did she go on,
peeling potatoes for stews
while boiling
in a thick, brown stock
on the stove,
caught in the sticky pages
of some man's cookbook?

How did the children not know
the tenderness had gone
from their mother's touch,
fingers cold as the blade
of a carving knife,
kept ever-sharp
and accessible?

In the cells of that hive of a house
she sat
counting the sweetness
trickling through her mouth.
How did she sleep
dreamless
in the thick narcotic fog
of a doctor's indecipherable hand,
with no lover at her side
and winter on her doorstep?

1984
Morning Geese
C. W. Mayes

The call
drifts across
still sky-water,
White, winged stones
released by earth
rise
and limp
on amber crutches
to water's edge—
in answer.

Leave Us

Amy Wallace

A negligee of leaves
covers the streetlamps
in the park at midnight.
Death changes people
we decide.

A voluminous moth
half-bat
lands into one of my
convenient metaphors.
And if I told you how
it is like death
told you how they are
both pale
and light and circle
something brighter
waiting heavy on trees
in the days

This is true
portrait light
though it is too dark
to draw those pearls
rearranging your mouth
your eyes as you speak and
turning, blow smoke

away like a bad dream
we wish would leave us

drawing on it
exhaling
old habits the mouth
can never push far
enough from the heart.

Let the Fat Boys Wonder

Robert St. John

For years now, the boys had been growing fatter, overly slopped, like hogs. Well over a decade ago, they had gotten bored, and they thought again about how to leave the room. None of their minds were up to it. The door was shut tight, like it had simply been drawn on the wall. There was a crack beneath it, but only darkness on the other side.

Many, many times, they had bent to look through the crack.

"I can't see anything!" blubbered Walrus.

The others just laughed, even though they, too, liked to creep to their knees to peek. Ernest was the only one who never looked.

"Ain't you gonna look—ever?" asked Hippopotamus one day.

"No," said Ernest, quietly.

And Ernest never did.

But Ernest wrote letters.

To Whom It May Concern:
Why are we here?
Your Friend, Ernest

Ernest would fold the letter with his careful hands, and then, he would inch it into the envelope. He did this every week. He did it for many, many years. He ran his small pink tongue across the fine edge of glue, and pressed the envelope shut with his palm. Then he would slip it through the crack and it would disappear.

The others gathered around him for the first few times, bumping into each other.

"Hey, Ernest!" bellowed Dirigible, "sending another letter? Haw haw haw!"

"That's right," answered Ernest, smiling.

"Who are you sending it to?" drawled Walrus. "You got relatives out there?"

All of them went "Haw haw haw," jostling each other into the walls. They slapped their knees at the fun they were having. One day, crawling from the pile, rubbing sleep from his eyes, Walrus noticed something. He nudged Beachball.

"Hey! Look at Ernest!"

"What's wrong with him?" asked Beachball, sleepy, but still

loud. The others stirred, wobbling the pile.

"What's going on?" asked Lardo.

"Ernest is getting thinner!" said Walrus.

"He sure is!" howled Dirigible, looking closer.

Ernest now began to wake. He opened his eyes and peered up at the bellies jiggling above his head.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

The others looked about, tittering.

"You tell him," giggled Beachball, clutching his pudgy knuckles in a bunch.

"Walrus, you tell him. You noticed it!" snickered Porkbelly.

"I ain't gonna tell him! Haw haw haw! It might hurt his feelings!

"Tell me what?" asked Ernest, getting to his feet and rubbing the back of his neck.

"Well, Ernest, old boy," began Walrus, "well, I don't know how to tell you this. . .but, you're getting thinner!" he suddenly blurted out.

"I know," answered Ernest, sitting down to write another letter. The others bumped about.

"You know!?" hollered Lardo.

"What do you mean by that?" asked Porkbelly.

"There's more to life than being fat," replied Ernest.

The others roared. Haw haw haw, they went, shaking and bobbing, bouncing off of each other with delight.

With tears in his eyes, Beachball finally said, still laughing, "Ernest, old pal, why you've busted a cog. There is nothing to life at all."

"Right," said Walrus, agreeing, "You don't really mean what you said, do you, Ernest?"

Dirigible stepped up. "Ernest and his letters!" he wailed. "Haw haw haw!"

But Ernest ignored them and calmly, he lifted his pen.

To Whom It May Concern:
What's it all for?
Your friend, Ernest

And he slid it beneath the door.

"Haw haw haw!" said the others, rocking.

The next week, Ernest was even thinner. Black circles ringed

his eyes. As a policy, he began to ignore the others when they asked him questions.

"Hey, Ernest, do you feel okay?"

And Ernest just sat there.

"Yeah, you don't look so good."

But Ernest didn't answer.

"C'mon, Ernest, say something."

"Leave me alone," he would eventually say.

He moved slowly now, barely holding up the lids of his eyes.

To Whom It May Concern:
Who are you?
Your Friend, Ernest

The following week, Ernest began to look brittle. His knees buckled slightly as he worked them. Bones poked out beneath the skin.

The room was quieter now, more solemn. The fat boys felt fat for the first time. They began to whisper. While Ernest wrote letter, Walrus took the others to one corner of the room.

"I think Ernest is dying," he said.

"What?" cried Lardo, hoarsely.

"That's right. I think he'll be dead by next week."

"What do we do?" asked Dirigible, his mouth small like a squirrel's. Walrus stared at him.

"Stupid. What do I know about death?"

And they all nodded. No one had ever died before.

Meanwhile, Ernest wrote.

To Whom It May Concern:
Are you getting my letters?
Your Friend, Ernest.

As Ernest sealed his last letter, he breathed a heavy sigh. The others, gathered into their corner, turned their heads with eyes like cantaloupes.

No one spoke. Ernest stood, crossed the room, and slipped the letter beneath the door. No one moved. Ernest seemed suddenly more thin than possible, wafer thin, paper thin, mist-like. He wavered, like a sail caught in a faltering, changing wind. He buckled, like water rippling, and he fell a bit and stumbled forward.

Walrus moved to catch him, but too late. Ernest, grown parchment thin before their eyes, snapped back, swayed, then fell. Then, as if drawn out, pale and lifeless, he disappeared on a wisp of wind, quickly, like a letter, traveling beneath the door. Head first, he slipped through the crack and was gone.

"Ernest! cried Walrus, bending to see. But Ernest could not be seen through the crack. As always, the other side was dark.

The fat boys huddled together, stunned.

It was at least three days before one of them found anything to laugh about. But by the end of the following week, they had forgotten all about their quiet little friend. They bounced against the walls again, making fun of each other, passing gas.

Haw haw haw, they were all saying, when Lardo cut them off with a scream. There on the floor, a letter, pushed into the room from the outside, through the crack beneath the door.

The room grew silent. The fat boys swallowed. They backed away from the letter, whimpering. Walrus, twisting his shirtfront into a knot, stepped forward and picked it up.

He looked into all the fat, staring faces. Shaking, he carefully opened the envelope, tearing at its side. With a quivering voice, he read it aloud.

"To Whom It May Concern: Having a great time. Wish you were here. Your friend, Ernest."

They ran at the door at once, stampeding, crying to be let out. Years later, they died in the room, fat and rotting on the floor. After a while, the janitor unlocked the door and hosed out the mess, smiling, collecting them into a bucket.

1986

Buttering Up Miss Valmy

Alicia Neat

Dear God,

Help! I'm trapped in here, and I'm all alone, and I'm starving to death. Dad locked me in here so that I can talk to you and pray for you to forgive me for what I did to Miss Valmy this morning. But, God, I think that you must be hard of hearing, 'cause I've been praying at the top of my lungs for over an hour now, and you haven't said anything back. I realize that you are very old, and you probably don't have any teeth now like Old Man Bledsoe who gums his food when he eats, but I would think that being God, you could at least read lips like other deaf people. If you can make a tree, why can't you read lips? But anyway, I'm writing you this letter because Miss Rachel Pearson of our church prayed for some spectacles and you gave her some, so I figure you must at least have a spare pair you can read with that you haven't given away. Please put them on and be quick about it, 'cause I don't have all day.

God, I hope that you have a sense of humor. I think you do because you made farts and stuff, and those are really funny. So I hope that you won't get real mad at what I'm going to tell you and strike me with lightening or not let me eat supper or something bad like that. Well, here's what happened today between me and Miss Valmy. You remember Miss Valmy, don't you God? She's the organist at our church. Her first name's Alexandria, if that helps, and she has lemon yellow hair that she pulls back in these flowerdy-looking combs that attract bees. She was the one that got stung at the Labor Day picnic. Remember now? Old Miss Reynolds can't remember her children's names anymore, but I hope that you can still remember your. Mine's Herbert Martin, in case you've forgotten that too. Anyway, Miss Valmy is always making eyes at my daddy as she shakes his hand on the way out of church, and whenever she comes over to talk to Dad about the hymns she'll screech out next Sunday on the organ, Mommy bites her lip and stares at the closed door like it was the door to Hell itself. She doesn't like Miss Valmy either, and I heard her tell Dad one day during one of their grown-up discussions that Miss Valmy probably prays more on her back than on her knees. I heard that, and I laughed, and Dad sent me to my room although I didn't do nothing wrong. It isn't my fault that Miss Valmy has arthritis like Old Miss Richards who has to sit on pillows every Sunday. I had to do that once too when I asked Miss Carlson how

come she was hiding a baby under her dress, and Dad wore me out. But when I saw the baby later, I understood.

Anyway, Mom don't like Miss Valmy and I don't either, 'cause she thinks that she's so good, because she can play the organ with two hands, and she can sing and play at the same time which I don't think would be so hard, because I can eat and talk at the same time, only nobody seems to want me to. So I decided the other day that I would play a trick on Miss Valmy, and then maybe she'd leave my daddy alone, and Mom could stop having damned headaches and making Dad sleep on the couch. So I thought and I thought, and I almost got a damned headache myself, thinking, but finally I thought of the perfect trick to play on Miss Valmy. It was so good I kind of thought you'd given it to me yourself, so if you did then please don't let me have to miss supper because of your idea.

I went into church this morning with a crock of butter under my arm right before Miss Valmy comes in to play that music that is so mournful-sounding that nobody bothers to sing to it. I tried to once, but I got in trouble. And I carefully buttered the keys like they were toast. Lucky for me, today Old Miss Sherman was singing a solo (not so low that we couldn't hear her) first, so that Miss Valmy wouldn't be playing until the part where Dad prays for everybody to give lots of money, and the organ makes them forget all the things they'd rather spend it on. It doesn't work for me though. With all the gold streets in heaven, God, I don't see what you want with my nickel. I think it's kind of selfish for you to want more instead of being so thankful for what you have, but then I guess if I was a god then I could be selfish and nobody'd spank me.

I could hardly sit still from excitement as I waited for Miss Sherman to wail through "Peace Like a River" and for Dad to welcome visitors. Then Miss Valmy glided up to sit in front of the organ, her lemon yellow hair gleaming and a bee buzzing around her head combs. From my seat on the front row, I could see her nod her head to Dad before her hands touched the organ keys. My daddy's voice began droning in time with the bee, and Miss Valmy's hands disappeared from view. A few lonesome notes sounded, and then a note so horrible that it set my teeth on edge sounded. Dad didn't notice, because she's fouled up a few notes before. But a few more of the farty-sounding notes caused him to glare at her. Her eyes bulged in her face, and she began to sniff suspiciously. "Butter! Some brat has put butter on the keyboard," she screamed, and her face was so bulgy and red in contrast to

her yellow hair that she looked like a ball you played jacks with. At first she had looked like the Devil's wife come straight from hell, and I was scared, but then she jumped up and started pointing at the organ, and hopping on first one foot and then another. Her always neatly anchored hair fell down, disrupting the bee that was perched precariously-like on her flowerdy combs, and it stung her on the cheek. With a scream, she reached out towards Dad screaming for him to save her, and then she fainted clean away, her arms hitting the organ keys as she fell, making the best music I'd ever heard her play. I heard a funny sound in the pew next to me, and I turned to see Mommy laughing so hard that tears were streaming down her cheeks. I started laughing, too, and the whole congregation stared at us in horror through their bifocals you gave them, but we couldn't stop laughing, because Miss Valmy was praying on her back.

It didn't take long for Dad to find out who had buttered the keys, and he dragged me here and locked me in so I could pray for forgiveness. But I'm not sorry, God, and I wish that I could see her face again when Dad glared at her. All I m is hungry. I can smell the smell of food coming up from under the door, and I can hear the stairs creaking as someone comes up them. The door rattles as it is unlocked, and then it opens and I see not Dad with a switch but Mommy with a smile and a plate full of my favorite macaroni and cheese. So I'd better go, God, because I'm terribly hungry. I don't care much about being forgiven anyway, 'cause I don't guess that you can spank all that hard—you being so old and all.

Respectfully yours,
Herbert

1986

Biplane

Doug Logsdon

On nights like this, when the air smothers
like a wet rag,
I prop a fan at the foot of the bed
and bathe in the running air

It oscillates and buzzes like a saw
Or maybe the engine of an old biplane
Pulling me through darkness to Topeka
The show tomorrow, and tomorrow night Marie

Who has seen every show in Topeka
And found the one she likes best—
Oh, those circus clowns are nothing serious
And I'm only through there twice a year.

1987

Miss Cary

Rebecca J. Carter

South Water Street began at the square and for two blocks became "Nigger-town" where the black barbershops, pool halls, and laundries could safely exist. Then it passed by a few doctors' offices and over a stream. There you can take a right onto a little street that winds past unpainted wooden houses and cracker-box brick ones. A lot of things have changed in town, but Cemetery Street just got older and more run down.

The tall iron gates and limestone pillars at the entrance to the cemetery have not changed. There's still plenty of space for new residents alongside the old, although management is now determined to be modern so all new "everlasting monuments" must be flush with the ground so that the riding mower can pass over them easily. Only the older section can boast original markers with lambs and angels for children, ostentatious and showy Cleopatra's Needles for families who were or who thought they were more important even in death than the others, and the aged, thin ones, their names and dates almost smooth. The new section boasts some flowers for selected holidays. (Nowadays they last longer since they're artificial.) And, of course, there's the burst of color and embarrassment of riches for new arrivals. But even the new arrivals' splendor fades to holidays and trickles off to the simplicity of gray stone and green grass like all the rest. Only the dandelions were faithful, until a few summers ago, when a new superintendent got hold of a sprayer and some herbicides.

For many years a fixture of this street and the cemetery was an old woman who called them both home. Miss Cary ended on Cemetery Street, but she did not begin there. She was drawn there year by year, grave by grave, until she, along with the rest, made it her permanent home.

Miss Cary Elizabeth Carson was the eldest child in a large family. She grew up like much of the rest of her generation—working hard and ignorant of her poverty. She shouldered the responsibility of the younger ones and worked as hard as any of the boys when an extra hand was needed. She attended school until she married at fifteen. At sixteen she had a son and at seventeen a daughter.

The little girl, Roxie, died when she was five of bone cancer and Cary insisted that she be buried in the town cemetery. She told her hus-

band, "It's not that I'm too proud or ashamed of where I come from or where I live, but James Henry, I'll not have the creek rising over our baby's grave or some cow scratching its head against the tombstone and knocking it over." So they gathered together the money and buried Roxie in the town cemetery, returning with only themselves and their son, James.

The Depression had been hard. But since most were accustomed to counting wealth in hams and brewing their own entertainment, it had been less of a shock to them than to the town people. But one December morning President Roosevelt's voice came over the radio and the outside world came into Cary's home. Boys left—many never to return and Cary's James was among them. His name was put on a bronze list on one side of the court house, but that was the only marker that she ever go to see. What remained of Jimmy was buried on some island in the Pacific. It had been a consolation to have Roxie's grave to visit every so often when she went to town, but a medal kept in a box in a drawer wasn't the same.

James Henry got a job on a TVA project and suddenly they were more prosperous than they'd ever dared hope. After a few years they moved to town and bought a little house with bedrooms upstairs and a full basement. It wasn't in the most fashionable part of town, but as James said with a wink, "We'll never have to worry about the neighbors in front making too much racket." He planted fruit trees and they kept a small vegetable garden. Occasionally, when Cary was alone, she'd cross the street and go tidy up Roxie's grave and ornament it with flowers and memories.

Their lives went on and James and Cary counted the years together. Though it was never spoken of, each wondered in quiet private moments what Roxie would have looked like had she grown up or who might Jimmy have married if he'd come back from the war.

A few years after retiring, James began to feel poorly and finally went to the doctor. The town doctor sent him to a city doctor and the city doctor told him he had cancer. He died at home in his own bed with Cary holding his hand. She had him buried alongside Roxie and had a fine headstone erected. The funeral was a source of pride for her always. "Why, just think," she'd say, "James was just a farmer and a carpenter all his life, nothing else, but there must have been thirty wreaths of flowers around his grave. He knew everyone and everyone liked him. He was a good man, my James was."

She grieved, but kept on. She gathered the wide bows and ribbons from the wreaths after the flowers had faded—for she had never wasted anything in her life. From them she made little wreaths for Roxie's grave and even tiny doll quilts and parlor pillows in a fine needle stitch. She kept her house spotless, her yard neat, and rented the bedrooms to men who worked for TVA—some had even known James. At times she even rented out her own room and she slept in the basement.

But as endless as her energies seemed, she gradually began to wind down like James' old pocket watch that couldn't be fixed. There were the slow little events that one doesn't notice because they gather silently like dust and are then reinforced by habit. Every day she cleaned the house, but every day she saw less dirt. She began taking long naps in the afternoons. Slowly she moved down into the basement, no longer just spending a few nights there. She told herself that it was "temporary" until "temporary" had become weeks and then months and finally years.

It seemed that so many of her friends were dead or dying. She went to more and more funerals to tell them goodbye. On one wall of the basement she taped up the obituary notices of her friends and beside them hung flowers or a bit of ribbon from a wreath until it parodied a teenage girl's collection of prom programs and dried corsages. She took to attending even the funerals of people she only vaguely knew and then those of total strangers. She became a sort of critic on funerals, noting and evaluating all the details such as the number of mourners and how much grief they displayed, the number and quality of wreaths, and if the casket were tasteful or gaudy. If, in her estimation, things had been done properly then she pronounced it, "They put him away good." It was sad how soon the graves were forgotten. She took to clipping the grass around the edge of the headstones that the groundskeeper didn't bother with. She even liked walking among the oldest graves and tracing the faded dates with her finger, wondering what the person's life had been. Had they been happy or sad, honest or cheats? Did the husband and wife lying side by side enjoy the first peace since they had married or had they always been compatible? What secrets had they taken with them: buries miser's money, little lies, untold sacrifices made for others, unrequited loves? Their lives had been different from hers and yet they had been much the same. Some stories she pieced together. Some families lay side by side, little babies, parents, grandparents, all in a chain with room besides, waiting for the next generation. But some graves were solitary with no shared surnames or endearments on their stones,

just a name and the date. She paid special attention to these. She developed favorites and brought flowers when she had them.

All her interests and activities had developed slowly and seemed natural to her since she had more friends below the ground than above it. But it all seemed quite strange to others who didn't know her. Some unkind tongues who should have been talking to her, instead of about her, nicknamed her "Miss Scary." Sometimes they asked her to "review" a certain funeral so that they could laugh about it later. But Miss Cary went on, her world narrowing step by step as she neared her own funeral.

They found her dead one morning seemingly asleep in her bed, a peaceful expression on her face. There was quite a sum squirreled away in her bank account. Cary had been like the ant of the fable who stored up for the winter; yet she had failed to realize when winter had come. She had left a note to the funeral home director not to waste a lot of money, but to "do it proper." The remainder was to go to the Methodist Church.

Somehow the funeral was a stingy affair and the Methodist Church was only paid for the minister's presence. A short obituary appeared in the paper and it ended, "No survivors." It had stated that the remains would be ready for viewing from ten to two. Only a handful of curious neighbors appeared briefly. Miss Cary looked "real natural" with her hair styled, rouged cheeks, and glasses over closed eyes. The pale blue liner of the coffin only accentuated its cheapness and one wreath of mums was propped up beside it.

The next day the Cowley Funeral Home hearse pulled up on a gray afternoon to the cemetery gates with one car following. Three gravediggers stood by in respectful boredom as the funeral director and his nephew-assistant emerged from the hearse and the Methodist preacher left his car.

"Excuse me, were either of you acquainted with the deceased?" asked the minister. "You see, I'm new to the church here and I have not yet met all my congregation."

The funeral director stifled a smile, "Uh, yes, in a way, I saw her often . . . at funerals." He tapped his temple with a manicured forefinger and continued, "Reverend Lambath, without being disrespectful, could you please make this quick? It's already 3:15 and we have the Appleton funeral at 4:30. There are a lot of details I must personally supervise, if you understand me." And he gestured to a newer section of the cemetery where a large tent had been set up and workers were busily arranging rows of folding chairs stenciled "Cowley's F. H."

"Oh, I understand, Mr. Cowley, but we must wait for the mourners and family to arrive."

"Reverend Lambath, we are the mourners and there is no family, so if you please. . ." replied Cowley through professionally pursed lips.

Reverend Lambath, taken aback, blinked and then not knowing what else to do followed Cowley to the graveside where the closed black coffin had been set up. The gravediggers, who had been pressed into service as pall bearers, stepped back a bit and one elbowed the other who had forgotten that his cap was still on.

The minister cleared his throat, opened his Bible and read a verse of scripture. Then he launched into a short general eulogy that was his stock answer to the problem of deceased members of the congregation unknown to him. He said everything about "our departed sister" and nothing about Cary. But his brevity was not brief enough for mr. Cowley who restlessly glanced at his watch and the sky that seemed to be growing darker by the minute.

Finally, Reverend Lambath asked them to bow their heads to close with the Lord's Prayer. Sure enough, after the opening phrase, the L and N railroad made its scheduled run and drowned out everything with rhythmic thunder. Mr. Cowley rocked on his heels, "Good, right on time, so there won't be any interference for the Appleton ceremony."

A cold strong wind seemed to accompany the train. "Some day," he thought glumly, "it's going to pour any minute." He carefully examined the toes of his shoes when out of the corner of his eye he saw another pair of shoes—a small brown pair of boy's shoes. And then beside them were another pair; these peeking out from beneath a long skirt.

The reverend was droning on, undaunted, as the noise from the train abated.

"On Earth as it is in Heaven . . ."

Cowley raised his eyes a little and realized that they were in the middle of a crowd of people. "Where did all these people come from? Who are they?" he thought.

Suddenly, the Reverend Lambath realized that others were praying aloud with him; men's, women's, and children's voices all in unison gradually rising from a whisper.

". . . and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who . . ."

Cold fear settled in Cowley's stomach and though he tried to keep his eyes straight down, it was impossible. Slowly he raised his

head to see an odd assortment of skirts, boy's knee socks, and men's trousers. His terror crescendoed with their voices.

". . . for Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever."

And with the "amen" a great thunderclap exploded and lightning illuminated the scene in a light clearer than the brightest sunshine. In an instant Cowley saw them all, heads bowed. The thunder died away and they were left as before: six men, a closed coffin, and an open grave.

1987

Vision

Martha Zettlemoyer

Years later Mother tells her version
of what happened the day everything chnged.
It was as if she'd accidentally put on
someone else's glasses, she says.

Father blustered in after work
wearing a pig's head and a party hat.

He peeled off his trenchcoat, tossed it
aside, and scooped up her children, who had
spent most of the day defying her.

Through the heat haze of potatoes boiling,
she watched them wrestle. All that
sucking and squealing while she cut biscuits.

Through his trousers she could see
the workings of his long, dense thighs.
They were still salmon-colored
with the mouthwatering cold he'd brought
in from outside.

1988

October

Jennifer Robinson Perillo

I plant garlic
when the trees begin to change.
If I wait too long,
the sound of leaves
is like tapping wind.
The earth is cool
as I turn it shovel by shovel.
Bees and butterflies come
to smell the damp crumble
between my fingers.
I remember things I had forgotten
I had forgotten. Pieces
fall like tiny avalanche.

I find a thumbnail frog
sitting on a mustard leaf,
tiny mustard green.
He hops and hides
in the shadow of a curl of leaf.
I leave the greens to seed.

My shadow over the fresh earth
is broad and solid
like the firmness of garlic bulbs
wrapped in layer
after layer
of delicate paper.

1988

Love Letter to a City

Rebecca Carter

I love Lima. Tell me that it's polluted, disorganized, and dirty, and I can't disagree. But for all her wrinkles, the old lady has a certain mystique—a charm found nowhere else. Founded by the Spanish conquistador, Francisco Pizarro, on January the sixth of 1553, the city acquired the name of "The City of Kings" because of the Catholic holiday celebrating the arrival of the Three Wise Men at Bethlehem. Lima became known as the jewel of the Spanish crown—a combination of New York, Paris, and Las Vegas. In those days, Peru was synonymous with riches and wealth. People would exclaim, "Why, it's worth a Peru!" to express an object's great value.

The city is wrapped a curve of coast. At night it shines like a collar of diamonds around the throat of the sea. Following the advice of some supposedly friendly Indians, Pizarro chose this site for his capital. Peruvian wits dismiss this as a most cleverly wrought piece of revenge. Due to an Antarctic Ocean current and the Andes Mountains, it never rains in Lima. The only source of water flows down from the Andes in the form of the Rimac River. Summers are brilliantly bright and tempered with ocean breezes, while winters are gray and exceedingly damp. Though the mercury never approaches freezing, the bone-penetrating moisture makes it seem much colder in the concrete houses that have no heat.

With a population of over eight million, one in every five Peruvians lives in the capital city. The expression, "Lima is Peru" is all too true and almost any matter of importance means a trip to Lima. Everyone has some family or friend in Lima to stay with when he comes, and everyone wants to be from Lima. Bump into a Peruvian in Paris or Tokyo and in reply to the question of his hometown, the answer will be "Lima"—even when lisped through the tell-tale provincial accent. Despite efforts to stem the tide, Lima's population swells daily—more people to share less space, water, and air. The problem is not unique to Peru, but common in all the poorer countries where the provinces offer less employment, resources, and, at times, little safety. Slums, euphemistically known as "new towns," rise up on the less desirable hillsides surrounding Lima like sores on a leper's skin. Their residents now outnumber the city proper. During the day they pour down like an invading army to sell in the markets and street corners, work at

any menial jobs, pick pockets, beg, or look for the scarce jobs offered in sweatshops and factories. At night they leave and a new shift of flower and candy vendors, beggars, and thieves move in to take their places.

The outlook for a ñewly arrived Indian is bleak. Often he doesn't even speak Spanish, but Quechua or Aymara. Accustomed to a life of hard work, he expects to work, but there's not much demand for llama herders or farmers in a metropolitan city. Women seem to be able to adapt better than men. Young girls can become maids with room, board, and a little spending money. They often finish high school at night and, if they can escape the snare of pregnancy long enough, they can integrate themselves into the mainstream and marry someone of their class. Properly used, becoming a maid is the way up the ladder for an Indian girl—alternatives are few, grim, and usually a dead end into poverty. If a young man can master a trade, there's a pretty good demnd for craftspeople, but without an education, opportunities are limited.

There are cities within the city of Lima; they range from the aging, to the solidly middle-class, to the well-off, to the vulgarly rich. Magdelena Nueva is one of the declining areas. Zoning laws are unknown and the market has grown like a cancer entangling once elegant homes with traffic, noise, and the stench of garbage. In the alleyways between the huge homes that have been subdivided into apartments again and again, are the single rooms where whole families often live. Probably the best way to distinguish middle-class homes and those of the well-off is the absence or presence of a garage and the size and splendor of the tiny garden out front. To the American eye the cities of Peru resemble vast condominiums—row after row of dwellings shoved wall to wall. The lower middle-class ones are like shoe boxes with a waist or shoulder-high fence outside and few feet of walkway to the front door. The space between is supposed to be a garden, but it is usually dirt. As the owners become more affluent, the fence will either grow into a wall admitting a front door with a buzzer, or disappear altogether to show off a manicured yard of perfect grass fringed with the omnipresent geraniums that thrive in Lima. These houses are not all the same like their counterparts in America. Whether the architecture is a copy of the colonial style with a one story Baroque facade around the front door or contemporary with round windows, all windows will be securely decorated with ironwork. The design and style will vary greatly, but its reason for being will never take second place to artistic considerations. The metal cobwebs are to keep out thieves—the homeowners' greatest fear after earthquakes. The really rich people are tucked

away in exclusive suburbs on the outside of the city where there is room for the tennis court, the swimming pool, and an eight-car garage.

Usually the more money a family has, the more "Americanized" their customs and habits.—at least superficially. This is true until the highest rungs of the social ladder are reached, and there the watchword is "European." The fashionable part of the city is filled with more boutiques and less of the huge department stores. Though there are several large, successful chains, they don't emit the exclusivity of a more intimate boutique. American influence and the expensive dollar make the sprinkling of Pizza Huts, Kentucky Fried Chickens, and McDonalds anything but blue collar strongholds. American influence is also seen in fashion. Fashion arrives in Lima before it does in New York due to the reversed seasons. It would be impossible to distinguish a Peruvian teenager from his North American counterpart, munching on an order of fries. Young affluents strut in the latest stuff, preferring costly name brand clothing with the proper embroidered tag or designer signature. Imitations flood the market since demand greatly exceeds the expensive supply; imported goods are priced according to the dollar plus a one hundred percent tax.

But the epitome of Lima and Peruvian society is downtown Lima—El g Centro. It's an assault on the senses. Elegant, wealthy men cross the streets beside short Indian women who bob along like exotic birds under their brilliant burdens of skirts, hats, and the omnipresent babies carried on their backs. In front of a four-hundred-year-old cathedral the traffic is bumper to bumper, horns honking, exhausts spewing out pollution. Tiny bakeries tucked into the space of a living room have ceiling-to-floor glass cases stuffed with aromatic breads and intricate pastries of every conceivable size and shape. From other stores alpaca furs spill out in shades of brown and beige like giant cats sunning themselves; from afar their softness impels you to reach out and caress them as you pass by. Every fifteen feet a street vendor passes, chanting in rhythm his or her wares. Together with the traffic they form the Greek chorus against which the major characters play. A man selling sweaters and mittens has been swallowed up by his merchandise, and all you can see at first is a shuffling mound of bright woolens. Tracing his voice, you find his brown face wreathed by leg warmers. A boy slaps together an armload of metal coat hangers in time to his call. In his other hand he clicks a fistful of buckles on men's belts that hang down like snakes. Women are stationed beside gigantic baskets of fruit and homemade pastries.

Outside the churches are the beggars, the lottery salesman, and the vendors of religious objects who sell plastic rosary beads, saints, prayer cards, and "miracles." Miracles are little pieces of tin hammered into the shape of ornate hearts. They were once silver or gold, but those were other days. Anytime someone wants to express his gratitude for a miracle, an answered prayer, or a resolution to a problem, he buys a miracle and hangs it in the church as a thank-you note to God or to a saint. The old churches have special walls covered with them—cluttered like an old maid's jewel box beginning with gold and silver at the top and descending into tin within reach. Some silver miracles are more specific and emblematic of the childlike faith—both beautiful and primitive of the buyers. There are silver eyes, hearts, feet, even little cows and sheep.

One whole street is dedicated to the silversmiths and jewelers, their windows reflecting ancient splendor now only a memory to both the Indians and their conquerors. Here silver means sterling, and gold by law is at least eighteen carats. The jewelers' cases display earrings measuring their length in inches. They look like lace dipped in gold or silver thread crocheted into tiny antimacassars. You may choose to wear the ancient god of an unknown people at your neck or an abstract piece straight from its European designer. The tiny price tags seldom reveal price; they tally the weight of each piece and from them the savvy buyer can calculate a rough estimate based on the day's price of the precious metal. The silversmiths display platters of astonishing size and tea sets all hammered from pure silver. Furious roosters frozen in a gesture of their deadly fight are reflected in the silver-framed mirrors beneath them.

Among the skyscrapers and modern concoctions of square and rectangle in concrete and glass hang the balconies. The old colonial buildings, or their reproductions, boast intricately carved boxes suspended from their sides. They are made of dark wood with rectangular, long-latticed windows that can be propped open at the bottom. Later creations are more simple and full of clear glass windows that allow their occupants to be seen. There are even a few Art Nouveau and avant garde creations that grow out of the sides of buildings adorned with stony vines and crowned with women's faces. But the most intriguing and lovely are the colonial balconies; in my mind's eye their shadowed interiors are never empty, but always the gilded cage of a dark Limenian beauty whose silhouette ends in a slender hand holding a red rose—a message of love to be tossed to one certain passerby.

Over the centuries the street life of Lima has changed, but Lima's life has always been in its streets. In colonial days one never needed a watch for each vendor had his or her appointed hour. If it was a man selling firewood who just passed by, then it must be around seven in the morning. Carriages and horses were common, but most people traveled on foot. Proper ladies of Lima could go about unescorted by day, but their identity was always protected by a black shawl, becoming a veil exposing only an eye to public inspection. While this may seem restrictive, at the same time it allowed a great deal of freedom, for custom prohibited anyone from pulling back the cloth to reveal the face of the lady. Women could come and go as they pleased traveling incognito. At night no woman wore a veil when husbands and father, no doubt, rebelled against its wonderful potential for mischief.

Saints and sinners roamed the street and Lima had plenty of both. Outwardly rigidly religious, Lima was the only place outside of Spain where the Spanish Inquisition sacrificed sinners to save their souls. But the city was drunk with power and easy wealth, the shine and sound of gold and silver could drown out the tiny bells rung during the Mass. Because of, or in spite of, this powerful decadence, Lima produced more saints and blessed men per square mile than the slums do soccer players today.

There was Saint Rosé who became the patron saint for the Americas and the Philippines. Saint Rosé was born into a well-to-do family of Lima who refused to honor her wishes to become a nun. When they presented Rosé with her future husband, she frightened him by cutting off her hair and scratching her face with rose thorns. After that Rosé was allowed to spend her days as a Dominican nun helping the poor. She built a tiny adobe house scarcely bigger than a closet to live in. It is still preserved at her shrine surrounded by a rose garden in downtown.

She was excellent friends with Saint Martin of Porres, the first mulatto saint. Saint Martin was never more than a lowly brother and limited himself to the most humble tasks but these he turned into miracles. After a while he performed so many miracles that the Bishop found it disrupting and forbade him to perform any more. Faithful Martin obeyed until one day while he passed on the street, a worker started to fall from a high scaffolding. Instantly, Martin put up his hand and stopped the man in midair. In the next moment he remembered his promise to the Bishop, so he called out to the man telling him to stay where he was and Martin ran off to get the Bishop's permission to per-

form just one more miracle.

Perhaps the key to Lima is based on its contrasts, the bright woolen skirt alongside the denim miniskirt, the Mercedes Benz being watched by a ragged boy while its owners shop, the Baroque cathedrals full of dust and candle drippings. Other places are mixtures of opposites—ancient and modern, saints and sinners—but I know no other city where they melt and clash as beautifully as in the City of Kings where it never rains.

1989

Closing Time

Chuck Keefover

I'm standing before the Big Horns
pictured above the bourbon, behind
the bar in the Washakie Hotel . . .
Tall tales bounce back and forth
between two beet farmers and that driller
with eight fingers and one thumb.
Young drunks arm wrestle old drunks
as if they were Elk debating tenure
and the barmaid shouts, "This round
is on winter. It just passed through
Ten Sleep and will be here for last
call."

1989

Approaching Heating Season

David P. Goguen

Anyday now,
the air conditioning unit
on the building next door
will cease its waterfall imitation
and die gracefully.
My curtains will come alive
like lungs expanding and contracting
with the breath of winter,

penetrating

layers of weatherstripping
laid by my hands
on autumn afternoons.

Anyday now,
an earthquake
will rumble below
and air from forgotten vents
will impersonate summer.
I will remember
when I was the grass
under old tires
lying next to the barn—
restrained and tender,

sheltered from light.

1990

View from the Porch

LaNita Kirby

She has stepped outside
to watch clouds fll, in crystal
dots at time.

He finally has company.

She wants to know the magic
of clover vibrating in wind,
the subtle music of their dark green
mixed against the blues
of a painter's palette sky.

She leans closer to hear
the dissonance
of his dangling guitar strings,
to see the way his hair mocks the clover,
swirling without effort. His fingers
wrap the guitar's neck, find more blues.

He smiles, watching her listen.

With the same easy grace of raindrops
in mid-August, their thought appear
to ricochet between
his eyes of blue and hers of hazel,
their bond gaining strength
in small bounces.

1990

Reflections on an Abandoned House Jesse James Once Supposedly Slept In

Allison Thorpe

It's just a dumpy, old log cabin grown shaggy with years. Two brick fireplaces—tottering bookends—sandwich the tiny rooms. Chinking has crumbled and lies now like stale breadcrumbs even the bluejays won't touch. The boards are rough, thick poplar weathered to a wrinkled blush. Broken windows, long and narrow, grin with jagged teeth. A patched roof of forgotten tin slants low over the porch eyeing westward, away from the highway. Gnarled grapevines, green rattlers, smother the north wall. Poison ivy has claimed the south. The east bows like a naked prisoner to the whip of ridge winds.

But for spring.

Come season, the old place dons a lilac gown of southern hospitality. Leafy petticoats sashay, cause the howling drafts to stutter, fall down, roll over. Year after year as I travel that same stretch of winding road on my way to a job of which I have long tired, that purple temptress sways in wait, ready to siren adventure loose from my middle-aged soul. With heady allure, the flowery perfume invades my window easily, whispering, "Slow down, come back, d-r-i-n-k m-e i-n. The stories I have to tell," it flirts as I race by. "Sit. Listen. I'll tell."

No time. I press the pedal, late as usual. The low hills teem with trucks and tractors. Ranch houses sporting pink lawn flamingoes fly by. Newly-graded roads, varicose veins, blur. My mind is flung to a time before the oozing asphalt, the machine violations, the three-bedroom bricks . . .

. . . the only sound: a fierce pounding of hooves as he gallops the dense valley. His breath comes harsh and ragged. Sweat pours salty raw down his face and back. Good thing this pony's stout, he thinks. Too hot a day for April. Smells ripe of August.

He curses. The shootout went all wrong. Lost his horse. Hell, what was that shaky old man doing with a gun anyway? Darn fool couldn't see a blazing thing. Hit the horse instead of him. Lucky this mare was near. They been traveling strong for a telling day now, and she ain't let up once. It's like she's been waiting for this all her weary life, and she don't aim to stop 'til she gets her fill. The dust is about to bury them though, he thinks. It's done ready to swallow them whole.

Driest spring in a hundred years, some say, and they pass more

than one field resting brown and thirsty, bearing crops of honeysuckle and bent cedar. Locusts rule the world. Creeks lie dead as the animals that go there to die, dry as the windy grit between his teeth, dry as farmer bones rattling to the moneylenders waiting to bleed 'em like stones, like the stony fields. Dry as one more day to face.

The pony tosses her saucy black nose to water. He lets her lead. They wander the twists of a muddy branch to a clear, deep pool. She drinks long before the man gets down in it. Whiskey couldn't do better, he thinks, though he'd be willing to give it a try. The pony nudges him in her greed for motion.

There's something about this money they carry the pony don't like. The man knows it ain't much. He wonders what happened to the boys. He didn't see one go down—none but his horse. He curses again. This part of Kentucky was supposed to be full of small, sleepy banks. Just right for him and his men. He takes a deep breath. He needs to head for Missoura. Needs to head home.

Night comes faster than their travelings, but the moon bides them through shadow. He sees a faint glow off to the right and rubs his eyes. It doesn't go away. There shouldn't be anything out here; still, the man slows to quiet. The pony has manners enough to follow.

It's a small place out in the middle of the dark. He ties the horse to a shagbark and steals closer. The air is heavy with lilac, powerful enough to addle a man's senses. He feels lost among its savored force.

"Up easy now." The metal is ice on his neck, the voice low. Female. "What are you up to sneaking around a person's window in the middle of the night?"

"My horse and I been riding hard," he answers. "We need a place to sleep."

"You smell like you been riding hard. I want you to turn real slow."

He moves. She is shy of five feet with hair the look and color of steel, modeling a set of red johnnys, and aiming a sawed-off barrel at his heart. Something wasn't right. Something about her eyes.

"You're blind," he says, lowering his arms.

"Keep 'em up there, sonny. Just 'cause a person's eyeballs give out don't mean they can't see! Now, who are you? Where you headed?"

What to say?

"I'm waiting."

Then, "You wouldn't be the first man I killed."

"Bob Walker. Heading out for the cattle drives."

"Ain't been cattle drives through here since . . ."

"Going to visit my brother."

"Wouldn't be traveling so fast."

"I robbed bank."

"Now we're getting somewhere. Put your hands down and go rescue that poor horse. Barn's yonder."

He rubs and blankets the pony. Tosses hay from a tidy stack. A pair of large bays watch with curious care. An old black buggy sits tucked back in shadows. Everything was kept well. Too well, he thinks. Must be some old man about. Sons. A blind woman couldn't do all this. He returns with cautious step.

"I'm alone," she calls impatiently from inside, tracking his silence, reading his thoughts. "Come in, come in, there's hot food."

There is indeed. Fresh bread. Stew full of carrots, potatoes, green beans, and beef chunks big as the state of Missoura. The man laughs. He sees berry pie and cups of dark, steaming coffee. He almost forgets the old woman in his hunger.

"I like a man with an appetite. My late husband and all my boys was fine eaters. What joy to set a table full. There's tobacco in the far drawer." She shuffles toward the pantry. Brings out a bottle and pours two shots. "To them that lives outside."

"Outside what, ma'am?" he asks.

She taps his glass. Throws it back like a cowhand. "One's enough for me, but pour what you will. There's a mess of rooms down the hall."

"Front of the fire is fine with me, ma'am." He draws another shot, trying to cool his parched throat. What luck, he thinks, in finding this place.

"It feels safe having a man in the house again. Can't be too careful. Not with people like Jesse James running in and out of Kentucky."

"Jesse James, huh?" He misses the glass. "I was just fooling before about robbing banks." Spills on his leg.

"Well, I can see when a man's tired."

He turns away. "I'll tend to the coals."

For all his troubles, a dead sleep finds the man. When he wakes, it's with a start in the unfamiliar dimness.

"Old woman, what are you doing rustling in the night?" He

smells side pork frying.

"Son, for me it's always night."

They down their fill, the woman chattering on like a morning bird. Like easy family. She hears the horse first and motions the man to stillness, but he readies his gun as she strides into the yard.

"Morning, Clem."

"Cora." The man on the big chestnut nods. "You all right this morning?" The voice is rough.

"I'm fine! And know you well enough to know you ain't come to pass the day. What's on your mind?"

"It's the James gang. They hit nearby. Heard tell Jesse headed this way."

"Clem, I keep my gun loaded and I can use it!"

"I know it, Cora. Now don't get yourself excited. I just think it's right foolish for a woman to be living out here by herself. One of these . . ."

"We been through all that!" She cuts in. "I'm staying! It's mine, Clem, and I ain't leaving. Not Jesse James, not twister, not flood gonna do it!"

"He's a killer."

"I'll remember that."

The man inside hears the dust of fast hooves. Then her strong mutterings, ". . . meddlesome old goathead."

"Your beau?" He laughs.

"Oh, you shush! I got no need of a beau. I married my mister out of love and walked his side for thirty years and six sons and outlived 'em all." She stands board straight and still against a doorway lit of red dawn. "Now I just spend every one of the Lord's days in hard work, waiting to join my family." She nods to the large stretch of lilacs out back and looks young as a dreaming girl.

The man wonders at the purple and green wilderness amid the drought.

"Some days I get to wishing body would break in and bash my head," she continues. "Shoot out my heart. Send me on to the lilacs." Sighing, "I get impatient."

"I gotta go," he says.

Those sightless eyeballs stare down his soul.

"I'd give it all to buy your way in," he says a bit too loud.

They glare and glare.

"I know you would, boy. I know you would."

He shunts the moneybags atop the hay and walks out of that small haven, mounts his pony, and rides across the dry fields, up into the hills of tomorrow, and he can't get the smell of lilac from his head . . .

. . . as I drive by. Plows run rampant. Pickups whizz by my old jeep. Bulldozers raze the land.

Don't lose the lilacs, I cry.

Please, the lilacs.

1991

Lullaby

Holly Hedden

Watch the rain
racing in cold rivulets
down the windows.
Feel the drowsy slicing
of the tires through the water
on the road below.
Let the rhythm of
windshield wipers
hypnotize,
as the rain,
and rhythm,
and road
gather in a weight
on your eyelids.

And the Sons Will Pay

Beth Kemper

The rusty chains still hang in several of the trees—the tremendous, time-knotted oaks and maples—and they chingle in the breezes that rush up from the valley. Occasionally a horseshoe will emerge in a furrow of rich, red earth or is exposed by the harsh rain of a July storm. They are the iron vestiges of what Spring Valley was, of what Mr. Steele, with tobacco juice seeping from his toothless mouth and trickling down the crevices of time, proclaimed to be the golden age of Logan County.

Mr. Steele was an intruder on the gentle plains of my youth, the harbinger of the realities I would soon enough find beyond Spring Valley's natural seclusion. Children deserve an oasis.

"This was a mule farm in them days. Old Man Markum owned the place." The tobacco juice found a new gully, finally dissipating in a profusion of gray stubble. "I knowed him when I was a boy. That man knowed how to run a farm."

Mr. Steele made a guttural sound and hurled a brown wad to the ground. Wiping his mouth on his shirtsleeve, he laughed. "Your dad don't run a farm—he works on one. Now Markum knowed how to make a place work for him, and he weren't afraid of whipping nobody that got out of line." He spoke these words with a sickening power, a force rising from the dark depths. The winds rushing up from the valley mercifully pushed his words from me, and they joined the death-line of hate that pulsates through men's hearts.

"He beat a man to death on this here tree."

*****

Click, scratch. Click, scratch.

The tree limbs fingered my bedroom window, and occasionally a smattering of raindrops trickled down the pane, down the side of the house, to the ground, the spring, the Red, the Cumberland, the Ohio, the Mississippi, the Gulf. A flash of lightning found its way between the swaying limbs to dance across my pink floor, and I closed my eyes and braced my body for the vibrating drumroll of thunder—

Click, scratch. Click, scratch.—the pop of the whip, a howl, a moan, nails digging into bark, scratching, bracing, bloody, splintered fingers, sickening anticipation.

Click, scratch. Click, scratch.

Screams echoing the horror of utter subjection—not the slavery to mortgages or habit or responsibility, but true bondage—resounded within the walls of my imagination and challenged the fortress of my understanding.

He beat a man to death on this here tree.

I knew such things had happened. I had, after all, leaned upon that very oak and spent afternoons with Harper Lee and Margaret Mitchell, had heard my parents talk of separate restrooms and segregated schools, had even seen the white-sheeted men who gathered around the courthouse in Springfield on some Saturdays and passed out leaflets. . . . But not beneath my tree. Never here . . .

When it storms, and the rains pound the earth, the rivers run red, filling with the deep, rich, precious clay, pushing it away, somewhere downstream. I suppose it was never really ours at all.

1992
Premonition
(Litany for an Adopted Child)
Susan Maertz

I have been to
a palm reader.
She tells me
I have ten brothers and sisters
I have never seen.
Some nights I don't sleep
because I know they exist—
the way faith is explained
in Sunday School, the way
water will catch you
when you dive.

I imagine I've seen them,
their faces eerie and blurred
as they passed in cars,
the noise of engines, traffic
muffled by the sound
of my father's voice:

Your mother and I
wanted to choose
a daughter.
You were chosen.
We chose you.

1992
Half Remembering
Brent Fisk

I remember half a farm,
one shady side with the forsythia bushes,
the cistern sunk in concrete,
steel mess screening debris.
I remember the yellow paint,
the low front porch,
the creaking floor.
I remember windows,
watching snow filter down,
watching wasps ping against eaves.
I remember my grandfather's cough.
I've forgotten his voice,
but his stories are still there.
The long road moving against the river,
the whirlpools he pointed out
while cigarette smoke stung my eyes.
I'm afraid of forgetting the halves
of the things I do remember.
His face slowly yellowing
in a photo album, the yellow paint,
the dusty gravel drive,
and the stray dogs he wouldn't let us feed.

1993

Mother's Dress

Ann Qualls

I imagined you behind the door,
arms held high as the fabric
crawled long your back, tumbling
until your shoulders caught the hem
below your knees, fingers
maneuvering the buttons and hooks and belt.
I imagined the mirror laughing,
catching your hair up and away
from your peached face.

We applauded your entrance,
the way you twirled,
color snatching at air around you
like sparklers at dusk,
the toss of your skirt,
the pleasure your hands spoke
as they crept over the silk.
I wanted to paint you,
record the exact color of your flush,
the way your pale skin
soaked up the pink of delight.
Daddy rounded you up next to him
and drew the curve of your waist and hip
as he had done a million times
without any concern,
and when I kissed you good-night,
I could taste his cologne.

1993

Two Men Carrying a Mirror

Christopher Bratton

Two men carrying a mirror across a golf course at night. The mirror measures five feet by seven. At six second intervals the signal light from the adjacent airport sweeps across the perfectly planned hills and ponds of the course. First there is the bright white beam, then after the mechanism completes 180 degrees rotation a blue light follows. Occasionally the two men have the mirror in a position that reflects the signal in a flash.

"Did you see that?" The young woman is sitting at the kitchen table looking out the kitchen window at the night sky. "It looked like someone's signaling from the golf course or taking photographs with a flash bulb."

"I've got sugar but no cream. How do you take your coffee?" The young man is standing at the kitchen counter with two cups of coffee.

"Black is fine." The young woman answers without turning from the window. He glances at the back of her head then opens a bottle of hot sauce, breaking the seal of red crust.

"There it is again. Did you see that?"

"See what?" The young man sits down at the table placing one cup next to her hand and holding the other cup for himself.

"That flashing light."

"It's probably from the airport."

"No. I'm pretty sure it's coming from the golf course." She picks up the cup lifting it to her lips blowing ripples across its black surface sipping coughing dropping the cup doubling over coughing. The young man grabs the wooden pepper mill that has sat inconspicuously among other common items on the table and strikes her on the head. She collapses to the floor with a moan.

The sound of something heavy falling obscures the dialogue of the two characters on television.

"Good God. There he goes again." The man turns the television off and looks up to the ceiling where the muffled noises originate. "Martha! Do you hear that? He's at it again. Sounds like he's beating the floor with a sock full of rice." He listens. "We finally got rid of old lady Harrison and her stinking cats then this bozo moves in." He picks up the receiver of the phone that has sat inconspicuously among other

common items on the end table. He presses seven buttons in a particular order and waits.

"Listen. I'm calling from the apartment downstairs. I don't know what the hell you're doing up there but whatever it is it's a racket. I can't even hear the tv. Now I've been patient up til now but if you don't cut it out I'm gonna hafta call the landlord and complain. . . . What? . . . This isn't apartment 4B? . . . Oh, I'm sorry I must have dialed the wrong number. I'm sorry." He hangs up the phone. The noise continues from the floor above. Its regularity like a mechanism counting off seconds. He stares at the ceiling noticing the swirling brush strokes in a field of white. The phone rings.

". . . Ah, hello? . . . No, there's no Kathy here. You must have the wrong number. . . . Yes, that's the number here but we've lived here for 13 years and I don't know any Kathy."

The young man in the telephone booth hangs up the receiver and looks down at the scrap of paper he holds in his hand. The name Cathy is followed by seven numbers in a particular order. He pulls his jean pocket inside out producing two pennies and a dime. Wadding up the scrap of paper and stuffing it and the change back into the pocket, he leaves the phone booth. As he is walking down the sidewalk a long black limousine with tinted windows pulls along side of him. He stops. The limousine stops. The front passenger's window slides down. The young man leans in. There is a conversation between the young man and the driver. He tries to open the door but it is locked. A few more words are exchanged between the two and then the young man moves to the back door, opens it and climbs in the limousine. He closes the door and the car starts off. He is alone in the back with a panel of glass separating him from the driver. The young man picks up the phone, listens to the tone, tries all the buttons on the control panel. The television set flickers on but the only channel that comes through looks like it is from a security camera viewing an empty elevator.

The limousine enters the underground parking garage of a tall building. It stops in front of the elevator.

"Take the elevator to the penthouse."

The young man gets out and the limousine drives off.

He watches the numbers light up. 23 24 25 He is alone in the elevator. At the penthouse it stops. The doors open splitting in the middle and delivering a widening band of light into the dark room. The young man steps out and the band of light narrows until gone. An older man sits behind a desk. He is lit by a small lamp that sits inconspicu-

ously among other common items on the desk. He uses a ballpoint pen to jot down notes on a page of typescript. The young man approaches and is about to speak, his lips forming an open circle, but the older man raises his left hand without looking up or hesitating in his work. The young man stops and stands staring at the man behind the desk. After several minutes he looks around and seeing some chairs against the wall he walks over and sits down. The older man continues his work. The phone tht has sat inconspicuously by the lamp on the desk now rings.

"Yes."

"Are you alone? . . . I'm alone and I've got it out and I'm playing with it."

The older man hangs up the receiver. A bing sounds and the widening band of light appears in the room falling across him and the desk. A shot is fired and as the light narrows on the older man he slumps down in his chair with blood running down his face. The ballpoint pen has stopped in the middle of a word and drops from his hand. The young man moves up to the desk and looks at the man then at the numbers above the elevator as they light up. 13 12 11 A flash of light from outside the window catches his eye. He walks over and looks out across the city.

"Did you see that?" The young woman is sitting at the kitchen table looking out the kitchen window at the night sky. "It looked like someone's signaling from the golf course or taking photographs with a flash bulb."

"I've got sugar but no cream. How do you take your coffee?" The young man is standing at the kitchen counter with two cups of coffee.

"Black is fine." The young woman answers without turning from the window. The young man joins her at the table sitting one cup in front of her and holding onto the other for himself. She lifts the cup to her lips blows ripples across the black surface sips.

"Hot."

He smiles at her. The phone rings and he gets up to answer it.

"Hello. . . . What? . . . I don't know what the hell you're talking about. Are you sure you have the right number? We're not making any noises here. . . . No, this isn't apartment 4B. I live in a house by myself. . . . Okay. . . . Okay. Yea."

He hangs up the phone. The noise continues from the floor above. Its regularity like a mechanism counting off seconds. He stares at the ceiling noticing the swirling brush strokes in a field of white. The

phone rings.

". . . Ah, hello."

"Are you alone? . . . I'm alone and I've got it out and I'm playing with it." When he hears the dial tone he hangs up momentarily and then presses another seven numbers in random order.

The phone in the limousine rings. The young man hesitates before picking up the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Are you alone? . . . I'm alone and I've got it out and I'm playing with it."

"Are you the one I'm going to see tonight?"

". . . Yes. We could get together and have some fun. Are you touching yourself?"

"Is it getting hard?"

"It's big and hard."

"Are you going to come?"

"We just pulled into the parking garage now." The young man hangs up the receiver.

Alone in the elevator he watches the numbers light up. 39 40 41 There is a telephone conspicuously encased in glass but it does not ring. At the penthouse the elevator stops. The doors open splitting in the middle and delivering a widening band of light into the dark room. The young man steps out and the band of light narrows until gone. An older man sits behind the desk.

The young man is sitting in a chair against the wall when the elevator doors open and there is a shot. The older man comes from behind the desk holding a gun. The two of them walk together, stopping at the elevator, the doors of which open and close open and close. A black revolver prevents the doors from meeting. The older man taps the gun with his foot sending it sliding back into the elevator. The doors close cutting off the light.

3 2 1 The elevator doors open and two suited men step in. One pushes the 9 button. There is no conversation or eye contact between them as they ascend.

On the 9th floor they stand silently in front of an apartment door. One knocks. There is no response. One motions with his head to the knob and the other turns it clockwise until the door opens. Inside the apartment they look around with a minimum amount of touching. A spoon is found half buried conspicuously between sofa cushions. One extracts it carefully as the other looks on. After examining the spoon he

sticks his tongue briefly to the bowl. The other takes the spoon and places it in his mouth dragging his thin lips across the bowl as he pulls it out.

"What is that taste?"

"Heroin." The other makes a face of disgust but the expression is interrupted by the phone ringing.

"Hello."

"Are you alone? . . . I'm alone and I've got it out and I'm playing with it."

:I think it's for you."

The other takes the receiver and listens for a minute. Then he hangs up. "Let's check the garage. See if his car is still here."

The elevator lights: 5 6 7 The doors open to expose the body of a middle aged man. One of the suited men steps in and kneels.

"Is that our man?"

"Could be. Hard to tell. He's hit in the face."

"Let's go back to the apartment and call in." The two start down the hall but when the elevator doors begin to close one jumps back to prevent them.

"Here. This should do it." He places the dead man's foot between the two doors which open and close open and close.

Back at the apartment one makes a phone call and says some things while the other sits on the couch tapping the spoon against his palm. When they return to the elevator its doors are closed. One pushes the button.

"I'm going down to the lobby. You stay here and wait for the elevator." He runs down the hall and enters a door marked stairs.

28 27 26 He watches the lights. The doors open but the elevator is empty except for a black revolver. He steps in and picks up the gun. As he examines it the doors close and the elevator begins its ascent. 13 14 15

It stops at the penthouse and the door opens. There is a shot from the dark room and flattening himself against the elevator wall he returns the fire with the black revolver. Shots are exchanged. One from the elevator followed by one from the dark room. The phone behind the glass rings. He smashes the glass with the handle of the gun.

"I hear shots. What's going on up there?"

"I've got it out and I'm playing with it."

"I'll be right up."

The elevator doors close and the descent is made. 35 34 33

42 43 44 The two suited men step cautiously out of the elevator with their guns drawn, pointed into the darkness. They find the older man slumped behind the desk, a bullet in his face. The edges of the room are in darkness and they look carefully at each shadow and outline. The phone rings but neither answer it. The young man bolts from out of the darkness making a break from the lighted elevator. One of the suited men follows him with his gun but the other is in the way. The other aims his gun at the young man but a flash of light from the window. . . .

"Did you see that?" The young man is handcuffed in the back of a police car. "It looked like someone's signaling from the golf course or taking pictures with a flash."

Neither officer turns to look at him. "It's probably from the airport."

Two men carrying a mirror across a golf course at night. The mirror measures five feet by seven.

1994

What the Civil War Never Resolved

Wes Berry

My best buddy Lance and I visited a friend in Florida. On the night of our arrival in Titusville, Dan treated us to a pork rib feast at Frankie's Barbecue Wings N' Things. We say at a corner table, hunched-over heaping plates of flesh and bone, gnawing meat from the bones in carnivorous fury. T-Rexian college boys in manners and appetite. Lance's reddish-brown beard and moustache were matted with tomato sauce. He is Lannie the Horrible at the table.

"How do you guys like the ribs?" Dan asked.

"They're good," I said, "but I like a little more heat and vinegar in my rib sauce."

"You damn Yankees don't know anything about good barbecue."

"Damn Yankees!" Lance shouted, bouncing a rib bone off his plate, splattering tomato sauce over the table. "I'm Southern—by God!"

Southern by God? This passionate proclamation erupting from Lance's lips made me smile. I thought, "What is he thinking, this salmon-eating blubberhead who lived his first twelve years in the heart of Alaska?" Is Lance really a Southerner? Does living in southern Kentucky for eleven years make him a Southerner, even if he survived forty-below winters in Fairbanks for over half his life? Who can define Southernism! My quest for a specific definition has generated a giant gumbo of opinions.

I remember my eighth-grade history teacher saying that the Mason-Dixon line (the hypothetical boundary between Maryland and Pennsylvania) was popularly regarded as the dividing line between the South and the North. I'm skeptical. Sure, Maryland farmers grow some tobacco, and Maryland was a border state during the Civil War. But I can't believe the state or its natives are Southern. After all, Maryland is one of those small states in that lump of small states in the upper right-hand corner of my U.S. map. It shares a peninsula with Delaware and is neighbor to Joysy. Okay, so Maryland is also close to Virginia. But is Virginia a Southern state? Virginia farmers produce much tobacco, that green, spade-shaped leaf indigenous to the South. But have you ever spoken with a native of Norfolk? Yankee, I tell you. Surely these folks aren't **true** Southern. I can't explain why I feel this way—it's a gut feeling.

A woman from Arkansas told me that Kentuckians are Yankees.

"Are you sure?" I asked. "Do you really believe that the home of the Derby, famous fried chicken, slow-sippin' bourbon, and tobacco growers (and chewers—you know a Kentuckian is level-headed if he has tobacco juice dripping from both corners of his mouth, don't you?) is a Yankee state?" She stuck to her guns, nodding an affirmative "yes." I believe this woman has some "little rocks" in her head. It is a gut feeling.

A woman from Connecticut introduced herself while we waited in line to tour the White House. "Your accent is charming. Where are you from?"

"Kentucky, ma'am."

"Really. I've driven through Kentucky. Quite pretty. You Southerners are quite friendly. Quite."

"Thank you, ma'am," I said, swelling with pride as she recognized my Southern heritage. "I like to think that we are **quite** hospitable." Yes, I consider myself a Southerner. I drive a Ford pick-up and speak in a drawl which becomes more pronounced when fishing with my country-boy friends. I eat 'polk salat' with eggs over-boiled so that the green ring separates the yolk from the white. I work with men who speak of little besides coon hunting, fighting and trucks.

On coon hunting:

Jimmy: "Grumble mumble heh heh heh DAWG mumble treed grumble DAWG heh (spit) brumble gumble heh heh DAWG!"

Chigger (alias Dale): "Yep. Dayam DAWG mumble grakin grumble DAWG bassturd treed. Heh heh! Shet em. Sheeting DAWG!"

On fighting:

Herman: "He squez me so hard wit dem legs, it made me wanna fit. I don't believe I could wup that sonuvabitch. I wayload that mother. That's how ignorant bote of us wuz. Next day, I was sowa (sore).

Jewell: "He'd break yer damn jaw off, wudin' he?"

Herman: "Hell yeah. He's the stoutest sonuvabitch I ever seen in my life. I garntee ye. I wupped em' once, but I don't wanna roll on em' agin. You can wup a man if you can outwind em' but I can't stay no more. I ain't got no wind no more. If luck goes good, I'll live to be fotey, wit all dem smokes I smokes.

On trucks:

Herman: "I lak red, but it's hardern' hell to kep clean. IT cost six-hunnard to put new tars on it. Ain't nuttin' lak drivin' a new truck. I lak it! Ye pay for it, but it don't really make no difference, long as ye

lak it. And I run the dawgshit outta my truck, ye know. I let my arnge palers (orange peelers, loud exhausts) talkin' fer me. Hunnard-fitty mile an air." These men swear they are Southern. I believe them—not just because the speak in a hick dialect (although the drawl is, I think, an important aspect of the Southern character)—but because Herman says (speaking for the group), "Hell yeah, we're Southern! What kind of lame-dick-college-boy question is that? Didn't you learn nuttin' in all dem years of school?"

I've been to 'hog-killins' at granpa's farm and gorged myself with crispy cracklings from the big iron kettle till I was well-leavened, bloated, fat-sick. Grandpa says that fried hog fat puts hair on your chest and gravel in your craw. Perhaps, but I haven't touched cracklings since. I know Grandpa is a Southerner. It is a gut feeling. He mashes together with his fork a half-stick butter and dark sorghum, sops it up with homemade biscuit, and inhales the sweet, morning after morning. He wears faded denim overalls to every place but church. He watches Hee Haw on Saturday night. And I'm his blood. I've cut his tobacco and hauled his hay, fished his creek and killed his hogs. I'm his 'little chitlin.' Surely I'm Southern too.

I've grown to believe that Kentuckians are the aggregate of all that is friendly. But my pride was knocked-back a bit recently when I visited a small southern town in Mississippi and experienced a hospitality there superior to the most respectable example of hospitableness. The old men sitting on the benches outside the courthouse, the town hub, waved at us as we drove by. Drivers of other vehicles were polite, allowing our university van the right-of-way at intersections. I asked directions of several people while hiking the town; all were polite in their direction-giving. The white-haired woman who served me breakfast, impressed by the rapidity with which I inhaled my sausages, eggs, biscuits, bacon, garlic-grits, and coffee (black).\, threatened to take me home with her and serve me a "rale male" (as I looked like a growin' bo-wee and all). I experienced **true** Southern hospitality during my stay in Mississippi. Indeed, the experience made me question the degree of my Southern character.

I tried again to discover a "concrete" definition of Southernism. This time I visited a ninety-four-year-old Mississippian, Miss Bessie. Raised in Mississippi, she had a myriad, a gob, a whole bunch of stories to tell about the Old South. I asked if she thought Kentuckians are Yankees. Miss Bessie, not hesitating, not even pausing to ponder the question, replied, "No. I believe you have to go farther than Kentucky

to find Yankees. When I was growing up, Yankee was a dirty word."

I was pleased that Miss Bessie considered Kentucky a part of the South. Although one woman's opinion is not the law, my gut feeling said, "Listen to the old woman. She is wise. She is trustworthy. You are Southern. Believe it."

I am still looking for the definition of a Southerner, or the boundaries between the South and the North. I have often said that the North begins at Louisville and stretches into Canada, because my Louisvillians are too fast-paced and proper-speaking to be true Southerners. But neither can the host of the Derby and the home of several makers of cheap bourbon be true Yank.

Is a Southerner one who turns single-syllabic words into multiples? ("The co-wut hay-yus stay-unds day-ulln tay-ulln own the squay-ya. Owva they-ya." Translation: The courthouse stands downtown on the square. Over there.) Is a Southerner one who lives in a town with one-hundred churches, ninety-six of them Baptist? Is a Southerner one who lives in a town in which the sale of whiskey is legal, but beer isn't? Maybe. I suppose we shall never know a precise definition, a cut-in-granite-law-of-living for the Southern character. (1. Thou shalt say "sir" and "ma'am." 2. Thou shalt eat possum and "polk salat.") Perhaps the most unbiased way of determining a person's degree of Rebel or Yank is by letting each person listen to his gut feeling. Each should establish her own degree of regional character. Answers to life's mysteries may be found in the gut. We should trust the gut. It knows.

The boundary between the South and the North, or between a Southern and a Northern character, may be vague in some folks. My buddy Lance is a good example of this thin line. But if that Alaskan native considers himself a Southerner—if he is truly proud of his Southern ties—then I would argue that he is a Southerner . . . by God!

1994

Digging Through the Attic

Stephanie Pippin

I feel as clean as gourd seeds in a bone rattle.
In all of this dust I shine like wet driveway gravel.
You enter books and boxes, prying into pulpy lids,
separating dirty limbs with light.
I sit on the floor, my legs curled under,
twin snakes on a cinnamon rug.
I read the veined, paper wings of dead moths.
Rat traps and photographs crowd around a poster of
the half-moon that once meant something to me.
One side of brightness is folded behind,
leaving the other to grieve its lost part.
There is a jar of ancient peanuts near your feet.
The shells hold their stone babies, sheathed in dry skin.
I imagine those mummies, those wooden sleepers
nodding against each other, touching pointed heads.
When you leave my walls fall in.
My hand closes on a glass bird.
It feels nothing in its clear heart.

1995

Dream of Stephen

Meghan Leigh Hobbs

he came to my dream like a nightmare:
battle-bruised,
courage-clobbered, but
painstakingly real
in the back seat of that old heap
that he ran from. . . .
ran over and over in my mind.
when his face was just a blur and his chest caved in and I thought
I could see the thoughts in his mind
as they ran in no particular order—*it's the drug*,
I thought, *it'll do that to you sometimes*.
it will make him cry,
cry like a baby to go home,
and I cried,
cried oh baby come back.
but the last shot was fired,
and
it
hit
its
mark—
the heart.
so he ran; even wounded he
stuck his thumb out,
with high hopes,
high, high hopes,
waiting for the car that would
take him home to Father,
home to my dreams,
my nightmares,
my ghost-gripping,

tear-trafficked sleep
that we live in . . . .
It's only a dream, it's only a dream
and I remember him saying it could be.

1995

YAK

John Broyles

The yak has gone behind the mountain.
Even the monkeys have been struck dumb.
The only sound is the heavy black hiss
Of an emptying icy river
And the steady moan of stars
As they gather and mourn and collapse.

In city rooms
People laugh about nothing much
And read books without reading the same line
over and over.
In time you'll nestle in my constellations
and i will be like them.

n the rapids
The current rolled a tomboy on its tongue
Like a small and curious fruit.
You jumped from that boat
Into my imagination.

Well, i left you on those babbling streets
To hawkers of hash and cheap violins,
And staggered sick across the world
With you inside my coat.

Lost and lonely in familiar land once more
You slip into my night sky . . .

I navigate by your memory.

1996

Drought in Warren County

Joe Schmidt

Dust on my mud-bottomed boots,
dry. Six weeks and no rain.
Wide field is dry and yellow—
a sandstone palate when I squint.
Cattle ribs graze among dry leaves,
roast in the brittle grass and stink.

Carrion rots and withers in this heat.
It is a heavy weight on me.
My throat parched, my well dry,
I must carry another day on my back.

Now I must watch my green land die—
Somehow I want to lie down with it.
And when the rain finally comes, I will erode.
I must learn to wait and have an empty cup.

Protection

Janay Crabtree

He is coming. He is on his way. I have not seen him in five years. I think about the way he looks—looked. Remember skin like lilies, pale under a sunny sky. Remember freckles in the strange places. Then I think about the sound of the laundry in the washer, the sound of the water gurgling in the fish tank, the sounds of a domestic, settled house to calm these unsettled feelings. Unsettled—exactly the word.

Now I am thinking about six years ago in the twenty minutes I have before he gets here. He was twenty-three years old and beautiful. I am remembering his words the night in New York, his proposals and my yeses, all the while feeling claustrophobic and needing a place to run. Running was something I was always good at. Then I remember his look as I hitched a ride the next day. I could see him from the back of that crappy Datsun—looking out the rear window. He just stood there—no waving, just stood there as if suddenly we would miraculously turn around. And I think he half expected we would. I think I half expected we would. But then I closed my eyes until I knew he had disappeared. Then I disappeared for good.

A week later I heard from him. He had traced me to my home. He sounded desperate, missed me, couldn't he come to Kentucky?

Kentucky and Wyoming are really far apart, I argued. He pressed—I could just come for the week. Three days. I needed to get settled in. I'd just gotten here. Maybe next month he suggested. Yes, maybe next month, but my voice must have given him some clue. I never saw him again.

*

Now I am thinking about the floor. It looks very clean. The whole house is spotless. I have been meticulous. I do not want him to think I am a bad mother to our daughter.

Our daughter. Strange to say . . . I have always thought of her as mine—or God's, but never his. When he called, saying he had run into friends of ours in Jersey, I wasn't so surprised. We had mutual friends all over the states. I knew he had asked about me on several occasions.

Of course the first question after grilling me about work, my love life and how the years had been to me, was she his? The second was why didn't you call me. How to answer that one. Well, quite honestly because I didn't want you in my life would have been the honest answer. But I didn't have the nerve to say it—so I eloquently came up with "I didn't want to bother you."

"You never have," his voice sounded farther away than the thousand miles separating us.

*

No, I never wanted to bother him. He was right. In fact, I bothered him so little, I wondered how we had managed to have a child. But then, I remember hiking across up-state New York, smoking pot like the Rastas, and making love on the huge mountain rocks.

Now, I try to think about my tune-up appointment, paying the electric and phone bills, getting the VCR fixed, but all I can really think about is that boy getting smaller and smaller until I close my eyes.

*

I am looking at my nails, then the clock, then my nails, then the clock. I know what I am doing. I am avoiding the window, avoiding looking for his car. The clock, the nails, the clock, the window—damn it. The clock, the nails, the clock, the nails, notice where a corner of the wine polish I used has chipped off my pinkie. Damn it. I wonder if there is time to repair my pinkie, and then feel crazy. He is coming to talk about Lee. I repeat that phrase, then look at the clock again. He is late—Thank God. I need the time. He could be a year late, and I would be okay with that. Then at least he could just show up at my door, and I wouldn't have this nerve-racking wait. He could just show up, I could act. Then I could feel better—ask why he didn't call first. Ask if he knows what a phone is. But, no that is not his character. He would call first, even if he was dying tomorrow. He'd definitely call first. Fucking "nice guy" is his style. I look at the clock again. Four minutes late. Ha! Mr. Nice Guy is late, but then I hear his car drive up and my self-righteousness withers.

I take another quick glance at the clock, then my nails, and then notice a place in the wallpaper border that has come loose. Great, how can I look like a good mother when the stripes on my walls are uneven. I am doing all I can not to look out the window, not to see him before he sees me. I have my ideas of being fair. He knocks on the door. I have no bell. His knock is not hard, but it is not soft or wimpy either. I am moving toward the door. I feel as if the trip is in slow motion. The room has become longer. I am now at the door, taking deep breaths, and closing my eyes. The door and five years separate us. I am opening the door, but I cannot take back the five years. We stare, both of us. I study

him. The flesh around his temples and jaws is tighter than I remember, but his skin is still the shade of Easter lilies with pink highlights, and his eyes are still the color of robin's egg. I think of cheese melting on crackers, the way salt tastes on potatoes, and the chocolate in creamy smores. My mouth waters, and I wonder why looking at him makes me hungry. He is studying me too. Perhaps he is looking at the extra child-bearing weight I never lost, or the bags under my eyes, or the frazzled hair that seems to stand up angrily on my head.

He is wearing a greenish-brown suit with a nice tie in earth tones. I feel underdressed in my hippie-ish broom skirt and oversized sweater, which I chose strategically to hide the flab around my hips.

I stand aside, ask him in, try to smile, offer a drink, try to smile, ask how the trip was, try to smile, but it is too much effort. My face muscles re tired from practicing in the mirror. He tells me he is now teaching drama in Colorado at the state university. Of course, I say, thinking he looks the distinguished professor. I think of all the young, willowy creatures on campus that must be throwing themselves at him. He has just started teaching. I think back. When I met him he had just received his M.A. He is telling me about getting his doctorate in Kansas. How nice, I say, but my voice falls flat on the kitchen floor. We both are looking at the floor—at the spot my voice has fallen to, as if it were a morsel of chewed food that has grossly popped out of my mouth and onto the linoleum. He looks out the window. I glance at the clock. He asks about my job, my life, my house, my child—our child. He asks if she has asked about him yet. Quite frankly, "no," I say. He sighs and looks at me both surprised and disappointed, as if we would have liked a polite lie.

When was I planning to call, he asks. Never, I say, too tired and nervous to lie. This time he looks directly at me accusingly. "I don't have to ask why," his voice is flat and hard like a copper penny.

"Because I am a good mother—alone." I am now leaning across the table, half answering his accusation, half pleading him to believe me.

"My lawyers may feel differently," he says. His eyes re now looking at the point right above my chin. I think about changing diapers, cleaning baby spit-up, nursing. I feel a tug in my chest, a small hard kneading probing me for more life. Maybe, maybe not, I feel like saying. Instead, I look directly at him, or at where his eyes have focused above my chin and blink. My mouth feels like a hard little circle, a nut in the middle of a snowman's face. I blink again. He is waiting, always waiting for a reaction, I will not give. His eyes are widening. I feel the five years, a hard steel barrier coming up between us, and it feels cold and smooth. Then I drop my words—words like ice cubes falling into a crystal glass:

"Your name is not on the birth certificate. You have little or no chance of proving that Lee is yours. Ask your lawyer—he'll tell you the same. Without legal proof of the birth certificate, you have no rights, unless I give them to you."

"And God knows you've never given me anything." He is now looking at his hands. Long slender fingers with pinkish nails, beautiful hands. I think of pale hands on temples, contrasting with a dark shoulder blade as those fingers knead shoulders and back. I am thankful he has such gorgeous hands, as I realize they are Lee's. I always thought she had my hands, but looking at him, I realize how much she looks like him. Same Easter lily skin, same cheeks and hands. But her eyes and mouth are mine, her eyes resemble mine, the color of steel; her mouth is hard.

He is getting up as I think of hands, eyes and skin. He looks at me once, then opens the door. I look at my nails, then the clock, and hear the door slam. I think of sun on mountain rocks, the smell of lily white skin, and then labor pains.

I watch the window. His car is moving slowly down the drive. If I hurry I can catch it. I watch as he drives onto the road; his car becomes smaller and smaller. I close my eyes, and he has disappeared.

1997
Clinical Depression
Kim Kremer

Rust rings march around the
drain like the brown
surrounding her pupils. I scrub
the sink with salt and lemon juice
while spiced pumpkins squeal in the
oven. The cinnamon smells like
her breath as she sat in the hospital,
drinking out of plastic, shatter-proof cups.
Llamas paraded around my sweater neck
and loped into her hair when I
hugged her. I left her sandalwood oil
and tangerines and flakes of mud
off my boots. I came home, put our
greasy, cast-iron skillet in the sink and
went out to harvest pumpkins in the
October rain.

1997
Finesse
Linda Watkins Price

I have a friend
Who paints cool blue ladies
And red rapes
And a woman of many colors
Who can't decide how she feels
All tied up in the chains
Of her chosen life.
She is a poet on canvas.

I am in that Joseph's coat
Bound by many colors
Yet not embraced by any one
I've been cool and blue
And angry as red & rape
Then swirled into yellows at sunrise.
I see myself
Everywhere she paints.

She knows me
And I envy her knowledge
Of my many colors.

All I have is black ink
With which to paint my life.

1998

Letting Go

Amy Croslin

What is it like
to beat brown wings
on a limb
above a Sunday church door
and feel one feather,
letting go,
to drift softly
below
to catch in the lace
of a young girl's
skirt?

1998

The Sound of the Bones

Kevin Blankenship

It is impossible to sleep at night when you lie awake and listen to the sounds of your bones growing. The sound is horrendous, the squeak, the groan, the agonizing stretching sound like ten thousand cars and trucks in one big accident that stretches for miles and miles in my head. The problem with all this is that I do not want my bones to grow.

Don't get me wrong, being tall would not be a problem except when you get to a certain height new expectations are forced upon you, like jobs, responsibilities and money all summed up in one word: *adult*. That word is a trap, a bottomless pit where they take all your childhood, all your toys, all the pies in the summer and hot chocolate in the winter and put them in a little box that is locked up and opened only for memories and stories to tell children.

As I sat at the table on a warm spring morning and looked at my mother as she swished around the kitchen making breakfast, the sound of my own body rebelling against me, growing and broadening, made me want to run outside and vomit my anger up into the feathery wisps of clouds in the light blue sky.

"Do you want some milk, Tommy?" my mom asked.

Milk, I thought, and suddenly the thought occurred to me that food was all part of the problem. When my parents gave me food, they made *adult* slither up even faster. All those vegetables and meats and milk they gave me was just a poison, a poison to stop making me want chocolate chip cookies in bed and jawbreakers that made my mouth turn all yellow inside.

"I'm making your breakfast this morning, blueberry pancakes and maple syrup," my mom said as she set a plate down in front of me. "Remember, tell your teacher this morning that I am going to bring a pineapple cake to the spring party Friday."

"Okay, Mom."

My mom placed two steaming pancakes on my plate and poured syrup all over them so that it dripped off the plate and stained the white placemat a dull gooey brown. The smell of maple rose up into my face and curled into my nostrils. At that moment, the smell was the most sickening aroma in the world.

"I'm not really hungry this morning," I said.

"But it is your favorite. Are you sick or something?"

"No, I'm just not very hungry. I'll just pick up something at school."

"Okay, but just make sure it's not candy."

"Sure."

As I walked to school that morning, the cool spring breeze playing through my hair and bringing me the smell of opening flowers, I thought of all the things I loved now. I thought of my toys, the toys I brought out every day and put back every night. I thought of all my books I read, my comics and my adventure novels. I didn't want to replace those toys with calculators and pencils and replace my comics with books of poetry I couldn't understand anyway.

I heard the sound of running feet beside me and turned around. Freddy Tucker and Ronny Berringer were running toward me.

"Hey, Tommy, wait up!" Freddy yelled.

I waited until they caught up with me.

"Did you do your homework?" Ronny asked.

"Yeah," I mumbled.

"Man, I didn't know being in the sixth grade was going to be such hard work," Freddy said.

"Just wait a little longer," I said.

Freddy and Ronny exchanged puzzled looks. Then Catherine Benjamin crossed the street in front of us.

"Hey, Cathy, what you been doing? Been playing with all your dolls like a little girl?" Ronny yelled.

Freddy and Ronny both fell into fits of laughter, but Catherine only gave a little smile and kept walking.

She looks a little unsure of herself, I thought, although I was not sure why. *She's starting to get breasts* was my next thought, and I felt my face redden.

I didn't say anything else on the way to school, although Freddy and Ronny talked all the way there about the new Superman comic.

School started much the same way as it always did. First period was math, a subject I always dreaded. I didn't mind it much today, however, because I was too much in thought about how the stuff was starting to make sense. I looked down at my math problems and thought of the tax forms I had seen my parents fill out time and time again, year after year.

Second period was English, my favorite subject because we were reading about knights and castles. Today, however, I barely listened and instead looked out the window and watched the sun play

along the highway and light up the different colored sparkles in the road. The grass on the sides of the road was starting to grow up, and it waved in the wind or to each passing car as though it wanted to tickle someone.

Something hit the back of my neck, making me jump. I turned around to see my teacher standing there amid the giggles from around the room.

"Well, Tommy," she said. "Just what is so interesting outside the window?"

"Nothing, really. I was just looking at the grass."

More giggles erupted from the room.

"The grass, well, that is interesting. Hmm, do you suppose you can tell me anything about *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*?"

"No."

"Well, try to pay attention."

My teacher walked back to the front of the room. I looked around at all the grins from my friends. I looked away and caught Catherine Benjamin's face. She was looking at me and smiled a brief smile. She reddened and looked away. So did I.

Next period was a science class which, unfortunately, was a lesson on anatomy. I looked up at an overhead of the skeletal system and shuddered. I could hear the sounds of growing bones all over the room. *So this was why they fed you all this information. Book by book, bit by bit, they chopped away at your childhood, digging a great hole to be filled by education and experience, making you into a stuffed scarecrow filled by bits of air and straw with nothing left of the wonder and the innocence that a child has. Where go the days of mystery and pure fantasy, are they carted off and thrown down that great big hole of adulthood?*

I could not concentrate the rest of the day because my bones were getting longer.

After school I did not go home as I usually did, to play with my toys or to play outside in the sandbox out behind our house. Instead, I walked down the streets of the town, looking in windows at the world of the adult. Here were pictures of men at picnics, at parties; here were mannequins advertising the latest spring dress. At last I wandered into the drugstore, a place where I could find shelter behind rows and rows of candy and comics.

The owner looked up and smiled.

"Hi, Tommy, anything I can help you find today? My, you're getting taller."

I reddened and looked down at the floor.

"No," I managed to mumble, and fled to the licorice sticks.

As I walked down the candy aisle, a thought rumbled up: *adults sell these things*. All the candy and comics, they were made by adults to fill up the children. With their sugar and their action, they meant to blind the children, to block their senses, while they scooped out the innocence and replaced it with newspapers and ties.

I looked around. The gumballs leered at me with reddened eyes, the licorice whips snaked towards me, meaning to bind themselves around my newfound bones. I fled the drugstore in horror.

Eventually I wandered down to Cedar Creek and sat on the old railroad bridge that crosses at the end of town. I watched the dark flowing water below me and smelled the odor of algae coming from the creek. I listened to the sound of water and felt it mix in with the sound of my body changing. In the distance I heard the rumble of thunder and looked up to see a spring storm building on the horizon.

"Hey, Tommy!"

I turned around to see a group of boys coming down the other side of the bridge. Freddy and Ronny were among them.

"Hey, Tommy," Freddy said. "Still watchin' the grass grow. We're all going down to swing on the old grapevine out at Cypress Park. Wanna come?"

I thought about it, but being around all those boys and listening to the sounds of their laughter and their bones growing sent shivers dancing down my neck and into my shirt.

"No, I think I'll go home."

The boys turned and headed in the other direction. I got to my feet and started walking towards the end of the bridge. As I was walking, I noticed that Catherine Benjamin was sitting on the edge of the bridge. As I approached she looked up. My face reddened.

"Hi, Tommy. What are you doing?" Her face shone in the light.

"Just walking."

"Mind if I come along and just walk, too?"

"Sure, come on."

We walked towards the town. I looked over at her face and the curve of her body in the half-light that gave her blond hair a silky shine. The thunder sounded again, closer.

Big raindrops began to fall on our bare arms and hair. I looked over at Catherine.

"There is a cave not too far from here," I said, and we ran.

We ran as the rain fell in huge drops and splashed our arms and our eyes and the wind tore through our hair and sent cold air quivering over our faces and along the curves of our necks so we laughed as though we were being tickled. We ran as lightning cracked around us and made the smell of ozone strong in the rain.

At last we made it to the cave and pressed ourselves up into the dark. The stone was wet and dripping and smelled of rain and moss, an earthy smell that lingered in the still cave air. We were both drenched and shivering from the cold, so Catherine pressed her body up against mine and I shivered from a lightning flash of excitement.

Her hair was against my cheek and I could smell her shampoo, a flower scent, mixed with the smell of earth and rain, smells that tore into my mind and made my body stiff, smells that danced and sang along our bodies as I looked down and saw her small breasts outlined in her shirt and felt her hands as they pressed into my stomach.

She looked up. We kissed.

We kissed and the taste was at once salty and sweet and the feeling was warm and wet. We kissed as the rain tore down outside and pattered against the ground, echoing against the walls of the cave and drenching over us as the sound of the rain merged with the sound of our kiss and became the same.

The rain brought in the scent of fresh water and a sudden blast of air made our skin quiver. We kissed, and slowly, so slowly, the smell of woman overcame me, showering me in a song of rain and lightning and wind that still drenched me long after the kiss had ended and I was at home, in bed, still and silent as our cave had been.

That night, the sound of the bones grew quiet.

1999

Heartaches May Drown the Heart, Not a Woman's Soul

Mikki Olmsted

La mujer rie cuando puede y llora cuando quiere.
—A woman laughs when she can and cries when she wants to.

This old Spanish saying struck my heart the first time I read it. My stomach churned from its truth. It became my daily mantra.

There was a time when I cried a lot. Nightly for awhile, then randomly, without provocation, all of my pain and anguish erupting in acidic tears that burned my cheeks and rotted my soul. The pain held me hostage.

But, slowly, my inner strength broke the bonds.

Like most girls, I've been swept away by love. I've had several boyfriends—some good, some not. One even asked me to marry him. A few times I spent weekends with their families. We looked at baby pictures, decorated Christmas trees and talked about our futures. Mothers set aside space near the family portraits for our photographs.

Each time we seemed as happy as any couple immersed in young love.

Until the call to apologize for betraying my love. The explanations were always the same. He couldn't wait any longer. He didn't mean to have sex with the first one. Or the second. It just happened. One described it as a natural phenomenon, like summer rain. And in a whirl of absolution, they'd admit who, where, when and how many times they'd slept with the others.

I barely saw through the storm of tears to hang up the phone or drive home alone.

Usually, first came the rage that accompanies betrayal. Every relationship was different, but my rationale was not. I'd admit I loved him. I wanted him. I waited to have sex with him. I said no, not until we're married. "Let's make it special." I wanted to give each new boyfriend my gift of virginity.

Then, one by one, they left me. And I threw temper tantrums in bathroom stalls between classes and endured crying fits at work. My entire world seemed empty and uprooted.

This last time I wanted to die. So I did.

I shut off my feelings of pain and rejection for months. Girlfriends introduced me to nice guys they knew. Nice guys who

looked different, yet acted the same. We'd go out a few times to the movies. Mostly, we'd go to their apartment bedrooms. I knew where I was, but I didn't know how to stop what I was doing until I collapsed on the floor one afternoon in a surge of emotion. Again tears—this time to face what I had done.

Too often young women become victims of their emotions. They become sponges who ooze pain and soak up rejection. They let men manipulate them. They listen when men tell women they love them or that they will take care of them. The women listen because they need to believe. They feel comfortable and want to trust their boyfriends completely. Most, eventually, have sex. Others use the next man to fill the pain.

Fortunately, the tears will stop when women decide their failed relationships won't control them. It takes time to heal the heart. Comforting friends can empathize. Casual dating can re-energize self-esteem. Praying can sooth the soul.

But each woman must look inside herself to re-discover her own strength. She has to forgive herself for doubting her own tenacity. She has to pretend she's okay when she isn't. She has to laugh when she wants to cry because some days she will feel her strength and rejuvenation. She will know her boundaries to establish new rules. She will vow never to let anyone take advantage of her again. She won't allow her sense of self to be manipulated. Next time, her heartache won't steal her laughter.

Out of the tears will spring resolution. Resolution will bring responsibility and the determination to make your own destiny. Go ahead and cry today. Tomorrow, you won't.

1999
Dejection
Christa Osborne

A pine cone, alone
Curled up on a table
With faded brown bristles that droop from the stem
Like brittle flower petals that crack when touched
Or a hundred sagging sandpaper tongues
That breath out a musty smell
Like the bottom of an empty cocoon.

2000
Miles
Tracy S. Epley

To see you stretch
like a river or a road,
your back arched
bow string taut.
Your mouth locked
around a sensual yawn,
your muscles as rigid
as pipe
and pink parts softer than
the underbelly of a cloud.
To walk beside you down this
river or road
free of history, scars and
clothes
I would even learn from
my mistakes.

2000
Union
Michelle Smith

I want to kiss a poet

feel my mouth on that mouth that molds words
into tulips, into barbs, into violets, into wasps.

The word *remember* tastes like black plums:
my teeth dig into the sour skin before the sweet pulp.

Lover tastes like early spring strawberries: one sugary,
the other bitter—impossible to tell by looks alone.

Loneliness is greasy, heavy in the stomach, coats
the lips—nausea ripples at the back of my throat.

I want his words to slip one by one into my mouth,
feel their round edges and jagged tips slide

over my tongue. His words are dark and rich
like Merlot. I want to eat his words spun together

in sentences, like cotton candy—let them dissolve
against my palate. I want to eat entire books

of his words, consume them, until they
consume me.

2001
Refrigerator
Danielle Mitchell

Everyone knows that tall things
go on the top shelf.
They have to.
Pitchers of iced tea,
gallons of milk.
There's no room
anywhere else.
They just
go there.

Likewise,
everyone knows
that medium-height things
go on the bottom shelf.
Giant tubs of
Land O'Lakes,
sixteen-ounce sour creams.
They're too tall for the middle shelves,
and why waste space on top?
(Tall things go there.)
They're a perfect fit
on the bottom shelf.
They just
go there.

But it never fails.

Someone will come over,
grab that Land O'Lakes,
then put it back—
not back where it goes,
on the bottom shelf.

They'll put it on top,
(because it's easier,
closer,
and requires no bending).
Then the tall things will be crowded.
The tub will have to be shifted
to get to the tea.

Nothing can be done about it.
That's what you get
for letting people
use your butter.

Coyote December

Alex Taylor

I come up behind the house, through the forsythia bushes that have grown limp with snow, pause where the clothesline hangs, a long, pale rope above the gray, December ground. The house is big, bigger than ever before as if its windows are shuttered eyes and its door nothing but a great mouth waiting to swallow me. A long time ago, my great-grandfather built this house. Back then, it had green-painted oak siding and beds of tulips that grew under the eaves come spring. My great-grandfather was a Deacon and so am I. Now the house stands with broken shingles and snow thickening around the chimney floe. Black smoke rises there from Grandma's coal stove. The smoke is big and dark like the house.

I walk quickly up the porch steps, my boots caterwauling on the dry permafrost beneath, open the screen door, take the tarnished knob between my fingers. When I was little, a starling flew into this screen and broke its neck during the night. I got up early the next morning and found the bird before anyone else did. I saw its blood pooling out like strong tea against the porch boards. Grandma called it good-riddance. Earl called it "a gotdamn shame."

The house is cold and dark mostly, save for a few corners where Grandma has set a kerosene lamp. After seventy-five years of living she still doesn't trust electricity. The house smells of mothballs and vinegar, cold cuts and old clothes. I walk quickly through the rooms, tracking snow as I go, knowing it will melt to water before long. There are yellowed photographs hanging on the wall, most of them pictures of old people before they got that way. Old, I mean. One of them shows a man in a white T-shirt leaning against a Buick on a dusty, gravel road. His baseball cap is pushed far back onto his head and the sun shines down into his dark face. There's a briar pipe clinging between his lips. Earl, I think. The picture has no color.

I find Grandma in the basement in her rosewood rocker. There is a crocheted shawl drawn across her legs and the smell of burning coal rises to scorch my nostrils. The basement is dark and all I see of her is the amber flame from the stove reflecting off her bifocals.

"You come to see the old man I reckon?" she asks me. I nod, dig at the quick under my fingernails. She looks at me, her hair sallow and curly, her lips drawn inward against toothless, tobacco-browned

gums. Her face is like an old, beaten patch of road, thick with dust and potholes.

"He ain't no good anymore. Allus knows it but you, Jimmy. Allus knows it but you," she says, her tiny head shaking back and forth between her shoulders. I shuffle round the basement which smells of old magazines and newspaper. I can hear her breathing, a sickly, sawdust-filled sound that reminds me of water flowing into a paper cup. She has pneumonia this winter and it's slowly eating a bright, red hold in the center of her chest. I think of this, watching the October-colored shadows crawl through the cobwebs on the basement walls.

"You come here like a tomcat without a home. Ev'ry morning you're on the back porch looking for that old man. I swear, Jimmy, iffen you don't watch it, you'll be just like him." Grandma's words are full of spittle and blood. I can see the blood darkening the white collar of her gown and don't say anything about it.

"That wouldn't be so bad would it, Grandma?" I ask instead. Grandma shuffles breath through her nostrils and coughs steadily.

"You poor child. You can't even see the harm it'd do to end up a man that don't care for his wife or his God no more. That's gonna be the death of you boy. Your blindness," she says, wiping the red, raw flesh under her nose. I don't say anything, wait for her to tell me where I can find the old man.

"Out back I reckon. Out by the barn." I nod in the darkness, trudge back up the basement steps, and out into the cold, December world. For awhile, I do not move from the back porch. I'm thinking of the starling again, its wings broken like toothpicks, its feathers crumpled against the screen, its blood pooling below. Then I think of Grandma down there in the basement, winter circling round her aged body like a buzzard on the wing.

"A gotdamn shame," I say and walk off into the cold to find the old man.

He is standing under the eaves of the barn, snow flakes dribbling down the brim of his baseball cap. His head is thrust upward, the whiskers on his chin thick with moisture. There is a briar pipe thrust between the paleness of his lips and smoke wreaths round the wrinkles of his face. In front of him, he is warming his bare hands, blunt, red things that hang like ragged brick at the end of his arms. Striding up the snowy path which has been blackened by that morning's cow manure, I see these hands and this man hidden, here, among all the coldness of the earth.

"Grandma said you'd be out here. Guess she knows you better than most folks sometimes," I say, coming close and drawing my shoulders about my neck to keep out the cold. I shiver, hear my teeth chatter, and watch my breath float away from me like liquid smoke. If there's one thing I hate, its being cold. Being cold gets inside a man, makes his bone marrow thin out and his blood thicken up. It bites you right in the balls with teeth like burnt Velcro. Sometimes, I get nose bleeds from the cold. In the dead of winter I'll look down and see my knuckles dotted with blood from my nostrils which was probably, at one time or the other, blood from my heart. Earl ain't like that. He's been cold for so long now that winter ain't no different to him than Sunday evening.

"Sometimes she does I reckon," he says. His eyes are narrow, blue canals of light and they watch the horizon, fold over the line of cedar trees at the end of the pasture like parachute canvas. His hands don't stop moving. They collapse, finger o'er finger, bright crimson flesh stapled to dark sinew and bone. Smoke rises after his words and it smells of ripe burley, reminds me of how old he really is. Eighty five this winter I think. He's wondering more than anybody now how much time he's got.

"There's a blizzard coming. I can smell it running down from the north. Liable to blow us all to hell," I say, scratching my boot toes at the muddy earth under the barn eaves. This is earth the snow hasn't touched, orange, limestone tread the color of pumpkin pie. Earl doesn't say anything. The pipe smoke curls around his ears like pale corn-shucks. I force a smile out between the porcelain shards of my teeth. I've had a sore throat for the past month now and sometimes I smile when the pain gets really bad. It's like my throat is rusting out and every time I swallow I get these jagged barbs of pain running through my skull. Sometimes I feel like my throat is full of nothing but molten shrapnel. That's when I smile.

Earl pulls a sassafras root from his pocket and hands it to me. I take it silently without thanks, begin chewing on the bittersweet pulp. The taste is like antique earth under my tongue and I feel a little better. The old man has been doing this for a long time, giving me teas and roots and the like. I trust him because he's eighty five and has never been to the doctor.

"Fix you up good, boy. Here directly, it will," he says, taking the briar pipe from his mouth. He taps the bowl against the red dryness of his palm and lights the tobacco again with a kitchen match. His face is the color of shale rock and I watch him close, the sassafras root wag-

gling out between my lips like a licorice stick.

Earl nods once and we walk around the barn, hear the dripping freeze fall on the aluminum roof. Our boots make dark patches in the snow and our breath flows backwards against out cheeks as we move. Like water, I think, and suckle the sassafras.

We walk down the rocky hill past the iced-over cow pond, rise again as we enter the pine groves. There is snow on the ground, wet and thin here. It clings to our boots like the salty ways of an ocean. Above me, I can feel the pines swaying in the breeze, letting snow drift down off their needles. There isn't a sound. In the summer, I hear chain-saws and traffic on the wet highways, song birds and the lowing of cattle. Yet, the snow has deadened my world, made a moat between me and all other things. The cold, nuclear winter has killed everything, left only Earl and me to wander these hills.

Above me, the pines are like dew-covered cob webs against the bright, colorless sky. I know where we're going. We clamber over a bent and rusty fence, tuck our coat collars in against the numb flesh of our necks. We walk down through crags of earth, kicking up dead leaves as we go, making a dark trail in the snow. We pull maple limbs away from our eyes, see jagged stones outlined with new frost. We taste the dry, December air on our tongues and it's like a fine, mountain-aged bourbon. Earl is still smoking his pipe and the smell wafts back to me. I know where we're going. I've been there already. A thousand times or more.

We fall about the forest, trudging o'er logs and strangled bits of frostbitten vine. We are trying to make noise without speaking, breathing hard and taking rough steps in the snow. Even then we are only passing shadows against the crusts of snow, things that can not disturb a world so deep in slumber. There are a few snow flurries in the air and they float against the grueling sky like oleander blossoms. Some of them get caught in the creases of my jacket and I breathe on them, turning them to water. We walk on, the pines creating soft alcoves above our heads, the earth rising and falling like a cold, gray lung.

The old man walks in front of me, his granite hair streaming out below the back of his cap. His shoulders are thin as wasp wings and lurch forward like dumbwaiters every time he takes a step. From where I am, I can count every liver-spot on the back of his neck, trace every ounce of time that has been laid upon his shoulders. His legs move with great strain through the snow and I can hear him grimacing, his face spilling out below his jowls like porridge.

He was in the war, the big one that came a thousand years before my birth. He fought slanty-eyed, yellow men in a far off land, learned how to eat cold beans from a can, taste another man's blood and ask for seconds. I think of him sometimes, as a man about my age, his hands thick with black spines, his teeth made pink by the guts he's been eating that day. I think of him in a uniform, a rifle hoisted over his shoulder. There's never much talk from him about anything and I wonder what he saw all those years ago that made him lose his tongue. I know he killed folks, know he burned babies and raped yellow-skinned virgins. And sometimes, when the snow is one the ground and the earth smells like cracked leather, I can see right through him as if he was never even there.

We walk onward, though cold-strangled briars and brown thickets where thistles and cog spines grow in April. Our chests are heaving in and out like billows and we clutch our ribs with the pain. Drool runs from my mouth corners. I feel it freezing on my chin and wipe it away quick as I can. Bending down, I scoop up a handful of snow and eat it. I'm thirsty and the snow is bitter like grapefruit rind. Yet, it is good. As all things should be.

Again, I see Earl's hands flash out before me, amber red and crooked at the fingertips. He is scratching at the stubble under his chin, his jaw punched out in front like a slack piece of rope. They are good hands, hands that have worked factories and plowed fields, busted lips and took a few lumps of their own. They are made red by the cold because he refuses to wear gloves, says he can't stand to feel his palms sweat. We've stopped walking now and Earl is bending his hands, twisting them at his wrists like locked door knobs.

"Cold?" I ask him. He waves the hands at me through the frosted air and shakes his head. The knuckles are like custard, soft and milky, broken by years of overwork. In the quiet, darkened ways of morning, he pulls his hands forward, as if trying to shake away some great, unseen weight. His blue-jeans are damp around the ankles and there are a few flakes of snow caught in the wiry stubble of his chin. Sometimes I catch him washing his hands in the snow, scrubbing them until the flesh is rubbed raw. I don't know the kind of dirt he gets them into, but I know it sticks.

"Woods are deep this morning. Ain't a thing around. We can turn back if you want," I say, licking the frost off my lips. Earl shakes his head, the wrinkles of his face stirring about like coffee grounds.

"There might be more in these woods this morning than you

think. Just o'er that ridge yonder, might be more 'an ever a man did see," he says, starts walking again. He doesn't wait for me to follow. He knows I will. For all the days my life is worth.

We reach the top of the rise and look down into a lonesome, snow-drowned valley. Down there we see straggling cedars and clumps of old blackberry bramble. We trudge down the hill at a slow pace, straddling the slippery earth with the sides of our feet. Halfway down, Earl falls to one knee. He grunts and gets up quickly, pretending I wasn't there to see. I can hear his bones screaming like rusty nails being pulled through hickory.

We come to the bottom of the hill, look back over our shoulders at the swaying web of pines above. Rabbit and fox tracks litter the pale ground and we can smell the cedars. I can see snow falling on the red flesh of Earl's hands and they do not melt. I know he's cold.

Earl taps the bowl of his pipe again, strikes another match. The flame burns an inky blue out here in the cold. He lights the pipe again, takes deep gulps of the smoke, and runs a hand over the thin, wicker bones of his face.

"Whiskey's over 'ere ain't it?" He's wagging a blunt, red finger at an old maple log as he speaks, breath and smoke following his words. I nod, walk with my head bent down against the snow, feeling like I'm twelve years old all over again for some reason. I get down on my knees, reach inside the log, and feel nothing but dead leaves and squirrel bedding. Then my fingers touch the cold glass of the whiskey pint and I pull it out, let the gray sun caress it before drinking. I unscrew the cap and press the cold, glass bottle to my lips. The whiskey burns the rust away from my throat and makes a little fire deep inside my gut. I walk over to Earl and hand him the liquor. He takes three, big swallows, the pipe still cupped between his gray lips. He keeps the bottle between his hands, the only warmth he'll know today. I can see a single drop of whiskey hanging, amber and warm, on the tip of one of his fingers. I watch the drop fall. It makes a dark, melted hole in the snow. I think of Earl.

The old man is not a drunk, though I'm sure he's been that way a few times. His face doesn't have enough color to be a drunk. Grandma won't let him have any kind of liquor in the house, not even beer, so he buys a pint once a month during the winter. We come out here, have a little nip when the notion takes us. There ain't no shame in it and I don't reckon there should be. Earl knows I won't come out here drinking by myself. I'm no drunk either.

"Your grandma thinks I'm no good. She says I ain't Christian enough and a strain on the family. I tell her its a gotdamn shame," he says, tossing back another swig of whiskey. I stomp my feet in the snow, shifting my weight from one toe to the other, think of the sixty years that has separated my birth from his.

"She says I don't take care of her no more and that I've neglected my faith. Says I've turned you into a drunkard at an early age. Like it'd be any better if you were older or with someone else. I can't say a word when she goes into that," he says. His narrow, blue eyes are on the horizon again, looking up the long rise. He sees his dark foot prints in the snow, no doubt. Right behind them he sees mine and can't tell the difference, knows only that he came before.

"How that be boy, me going mute with an old woman?" he asks.

I don't say anything and I know that I should. I'm thinking of Grandma, sitting down in the dark basement of winter, her clothes stinking of coal smoke, her lungs turned to cream of wheat in her chest. I think of the starling on the porch when I was little, its blood pooling out below it. The blood was the color of Earl's hands.

"You ain't none too popular with my folks neither," I say, finally. Earl sighs, hands the whiskey back to me. I take small, bird-sized drinks, feel my throat begin to sizzle like grease in an iron skillet.

"I aim to please," Earl says, licks the stem of his pipe. I only nod, waft the smell of whiskey into my senses. Above us, along the rise, I can see the pines swaying like a clutch of angry hens. I can taste the cedars and feel the memory of Grandma dangling at the end of my fingers like marionette strings.

My folks are worthless, cardboard shapes I think, things that grow damp in the rain and smother under July heat. My pa logs for a living and I think about how it doesn't even irk him to do that kind of work. He pulls the seams out of the earth, digs up oak trees that have seen eight generations of the Deacon clan come and go. He's afraid of time more than any man I know, used to read medical journals thinking it'd help him live longer. That's why he cuts the trees. Something that hangs around for that long and just keeps getting stronger reminds a man how little time he's got. He ain't a bad one, my pa. But, he comes home with a smile everyday and I don't trust no man who does that, no matter what his work is.

"They tell me I need to stay away from you. I tell them to go to hell. You're my blood as much as they are," I say, pulling my earlobes to keep them warm. Earl grins a bit, takes another pull from the whiskey.

In the distance, wind whips down the rise, makes snow shuffle from the cedars, and goes hollering like a blue tick hound down by a mess of dried up honeysuckle.

"Shouldn't talk to your folks like that. Even if you are a grown man. Don't do a man any good when he talks to his folks like that, even if they oughtta hear it," he says. We're just cane-stakes shoved into the ground, standing in the snow, our coats and blue jeans serving no purpose other than to give us form and shape. Earl is bent and his shoulders lean south with the wind. His face is pale straw, burned by ruin, washed by the sun. I'm younger, but just as pale, grown old and angry at an early age. Our tracks smear the cold away below our feet, but it comes back and kicks us square in the balls. I spit into the wind.

"They said they was gonna put Grandma in a home if you didn't start taking care of her," I say, pulling my cap down tight against my skull. I can feel my hair bunching up under there, filling with sweat and turning gray. Earl chews on the stem of his pipe for a bit, knocks the bowl against his hand when he feels the urge. The burley falls out black and smoldering. He scoops it round with his boot, making a dark slush in the snow. I watch him close, trying to picture him in some Asian city, burying the nameless dead as if he were planting row upon row of endless corn he knew would never sprout. I see him coming over a sharp, grassy rise and looking down onto the gray streaks of land where buildings lay leveled after Anola Gay has passed by. I see him grown ugly and wrinkled, letting his children taking his wife away from him.

"I been to one of them homes once. My Uncle Virgil got put in one after a stoke turned him into a vegetable," Earl says. He's starring down at the dark snow, his chin laid like a fiddle against his chest.

"Was it of God?" I ask, knowing he reads his Bible more than most. I cup a gloved hand to my ear and listen. All I hear is the roar of December, wind cutting like saw teeth through the treetops. Then Earl starts to speak and I'm a cane-stake again.

"No. God forgot all about those places a long time ago. It was just like this. Cold and shameless. It was a man-made December," he says. His hands are still pinched round the whiskey bottle, bright things full of purpose. His head is raised towards the north, his eyes the color of arsenic. He can hear the blizzard coming. There ain't no fooling a man like Earl.

Earl tosses me the whiskey and it's cold even through my gloves. I can see the dirty, copper-colored liquor sloshing around inside and I hear the old man's footsteps walking away from me. I look up and

he shakes his head at me to follow.

"C'mon. Better bring the whiskey. Might get colder than you care to know about," he says, walks off into the pale ash of winter.

So we're walking again, round the edge of the rise. I don't know where we're headed. We part the gripping, naked claws of dogwood saplings and brush old, dried cockleburs from our sleeves. We walk along the cattle paths, stick our feet into the hoof-beaten earth. There is a sort of weird, paltry light coming through the December clouds. It's the color of old urine and makes the snow slither across the pasture. Nuclear winter has set in again, turning trees into dark, hollow skeletons, burning shadows into the ground. I think of eyes folding back into wrinkled sockets from the cold, tongues turned blue in the frosted ways of morning. Man-made December, I think. And it never ends. Not for a thousand years.

I follow the old man to the edge of the pasture. He crosses over a bent piece of fencing and lays his feet on land that isn't his. The snow is softer in the forest, not packed by sunlight. It slides in under my boot laces and soaks through the wool of my socks. There are pines here too and we walk beneath them like insects unaware. I smell rusted barb wire and damp earth, a river flowing under the unbroken expanse of snow.

We come round the hillside, walking parallel to the earth because Earl's too tired to face the rise head on. I'm tired to. We lift legs over a ditch where there's a stream of frozen creek water. There are dead leaves encased in the ice and the snow is dirty with the muddy tracks of coon and possum. I can see stones and kindling buried under there and think about them not moving for a thousand years, not changing or moving or even wanting to. All things constant for a thousand years, I think. And that's how Earl is.

Then I see the coyote.

He's a big fella, standing a good thirty yards off. His coat is dirty and matted with blood and he pulls his teeth back in an angry smile when he sees us. Thick manes of foam drip from his jowls like soda fizz. The froth falls to the snow below and melts a dark patch between his front paws. His fur is bristled back like quills against his spine and his eyes ain't got no color to them anymore. His right front paw is tangled with barb wire and I can see he's gnawed it down to the bone, staining the snow a sickening, copper red.

Earl takes a few steps forward, slowly, his dark, red hands thrust in front of him. The coyote sees him moving and snaps into the frosty air, its breath clouding thick as troll beard in the cold. I can see his paw

dangling at a bad, broken angle, the bone protruding out of the bloody mass of hide and fur like an ivory statue. Another hour and he would've had that paw chewed completely off, I think, watching streams of blood ooze from between the coyote's clinched fangs. His tongue has been torn to ribbons by the barb wire and turned to the color of coal soot.

He has the biggest jaws of any coyote I've ever seen and I can tell Earl is thinking the same. He's moving slow through the snow, his hands a tangled mass of wire at the end of his wrists. In the air, I can smell dog urine and old blood, frostbitten wounds and stagnant foam. I can hear hydrophobia boiling deep inside the coyote, turning over like a hot, dull knife in the center of its soul. On my tongue, I can the taste the coyote's breath, warm and spoiled like old whiskey broth. On the pale sheet of snow, I can count every single drop of blood he's shed. They stretch out, a red fabric of disease, making his fur a thick and bunched roll of hide and fur. There's so much blood, on the snow and on the coyote, dripping from the gnarled strands of barb wire. I can taste that too and again, I think of the starling...on the back porch...when I was young...broken wings and all.

"He's got the rabies, Earl," I say, my lips quivering, filling my mouth with the briny taste of my own sweat. The old man nods, switches the pipe stem from one side of his face to the other. From his jacket, he pulls a finely-oiled twenty-two pistol. It's the color of coal dust against the snow, its barrel polished and gleaming in the season of anguish and cold. He has carried the gun as long as I've known him, I think. He's never been without it, bought it in a pawn shop long before I ever came into this world.

"So I can make the earth clean," he told me when I asked him why he had it. And me a ten year old kid. And him an aged and angry man. And the coyote and the blood and the rampage of time and the bitter rind of winter that we were swallowing...all of it was there. All of it came converging down into the marrow of bones like steel jaws in the December of my twenty-fifth year.

I blink hard when I hear the pistol report. When my eyes are open again, the coyote is lying dead against the snow, its blue, shriveled tongue laid in a pool of its own blood. Its eyes are the size of half-dollars, bulging out of the sockets, trying to see some hidden beauty in the finality of death. Between those humid, smoke-colored eyes is a small, red hole where the bullet went. I'd like to disappear in there, I think, and swallow hard. My throat burns.

"A got-damn shame," Earl says, his eyes looking out past the

broken, body of the coyote. He's watching the pines swaying over the snow, wanting to get up and walk away from it all. The pines know a blizzard's coming same as the rest of us. There's no fooling a tree like a pine. They got soft wood but soul's hard as polished steel, won't sweep the shadows from their branches unless it suits them. I look at them, tall, bedraggled things of green standing like lonesome widows above the snow. I see Earl and he is no different than the pines, looks upon them as though they were his brothers and he their keeper.

He moves forward, crosses the smooth, snowy terrain with ease, ignoring his arthritis. He gets real close to the coyote, takes a look around. Steam rises from the wound and I see earl kneel beside the carcass. He puts the pipe in his pocket, places a red hand against the dead animal's flank. He's not feeling for life; he knows there is no such thing to be found anywhere anymore. He's feeling for soul.

And there are no colors anymore, only the white awning of blizzard that rises in the north above the knobby pine trees. Everything is blank and pale, graveyard shades floating through the milky texture of the forest. I see Earl's eyes darkened by shadows, his red hands laid like blood stains against the hide of the coyote. I see the dark blue of the animal's tongue laid against the stoney ground, taste whisky and the inner pulp of oak trees. I can feel my sore throat burning deep inside my neck like heated Styrofoam. I can smell the coyote's blood. Earl rises quickly, looks down at the mangled corpse, sees the blood and teeth-gnawed paw, scratches the underside of his chin with fingers the color of Alabama clay. He nudges the animal in the gut with the toe of his boot and his breath comes in tiny, hurried clouds.

"Musta been possum-bit or something. Got that poison all in him," I say, gnawing at the cold flesh of my bottom lip. Earl reaches out, grabs two fistfuls of December air, and opens his red fingers to let the frost out.

"I don't know. Sometimes Jimmy, there's a sickness in the air and all you have to do is be born to catch it. I'll say that afore I go blaming ol' man possum," he says. I hear his words and think of him fifty years younger and twenty thousand miles away. I think of him in his Marine fatigues, wearing a gas mask, and carrying the bodies of yellow children unto a great bonfire in the center of Hiroshima. He has a tiny, sallow arm in one hand a small, wax-colored leg in the other. He kicks away broken shingles and doorways, will piece together a body out of the shattered detritus of busted lives. He isn't old but he's getting there. By God, he's on his way.

I see him vomit from the smell of burning children, feel his stomach turn to guacamole inside him. He has eyes of amber nectar and they fill with tears that are wiped away by the stench of stagnant blood. His hands can not do something so human as wipe away tears anymore. They are occupied elsewhere. Hands...hands smeared with grease and waste, hands with knuckles white and broken, fingers like cured strips of bacon. Hands that rise above the leveled city at his feet. Hands that are the color of blood and nothing else in the ripe, clear, coyote December.

"It was like this sometimes, but there was never any snow," Earl says, his voice rushing me forward through the first twenty five years of my life. I see him and know that he is looking at me, though his pale, blue eyes are fixed on some greater point that lies beyond my shoulders. He's in Asia, cleaning up the garbage, making America beautiful. He's old and he can do things like that so I forgive him.

"Was it cold or was it Christian?" I ask, kicking up a fog of snow with my boot heels. Earl puts his hands in his pockets and moves past the broken body of the coyote. He leans like a cigar-store Indian against a sycamore, his face knotted without emotions. He's thinking about God and so am I.

"It wasn't good, but it was always cold. That wasn't what made it bad though. It was all that emptiness where you knew something wonderful had once been. That's what I hated about it," he says. I see the whiskey bottle come out of his jacket and touch his lips, the rusted liquor sluicing of his tongue and into the cold. I can feel the bottle pulling at him, taking him directions he was never meant to go. I can hear the flesh on the back of his hands growing hair and full of leathery wrinkles. Above us, the pines are tiny, egg-colored lamp shades and God is an atom bomb in the sky. I see the mushroom cloud and taste the bitter almonds on my tongue right before the blast wave hits. Then everything is white and returned to its abnormal realm.

"You remember that starling you found in the backdoor screen?" I hear Earl's voice and suddenly its me whose in Hiroshima, picking up yellow children killed by the bomb. I hold a broken bird-wing in one hand and nothing but empty space in the other.

"You cried like nothing else over that bird. But you weren't crying 'cause it died. You were crying 'cause there was nothing you could do to help it. That's what it makes you feel like, this being old. You ain't cold and you ain't Christian, you're just helpless."

I rise over the snow, my thoughts constricting the gnarled words of Earl into tight, fist-clinched wads of paper. I think of the starling, its

blood pooling below it and congealing on the oak porch. And Grandma is there, under the house in her coal-stove basement, her eyes two, blunt wads of amber fallout. And my folks and Earl are there, spread over the snow like broken glass. There is cold and danger on the edge of my face, my tears ripening at the very verge of my eyelids. There's a pain in my throat and in the hollow, wooden space where my soul used to be.

Now I can only follow my shadow across the snow, a feathered darkness that does not die. Earl is walking in front of me, is halfway home before I even see. His ways are a form of anguish that I can not know and he's a blurred vision of sky and earth molded together as one. There's snow at my feet and I think about winter. It goes on for a thousand years, you know, flows back against me like a tide without an end.

2002

The Cutting Lesson

Trish Lindsey Jaggers

Seventy-two years old,
Gran'dad leads me through six-feet stalks;
one at a time, he grabs them at the heart.
Over his arms, muscles rise like bruises.
The tobacco knife flings white Kentucky sun
into my eyes; in one slice,
he severs the stalk "at the root";
life blood leaks, hot and milky.
Tobacco lice grit the leaves,
fall like sand. I take the plant from him,
force the steel spike through its body;
the air mists with its sticky ghost.
He squints into the tunnel of the sun—
distant as the water cooler at the end
of the row. Sixty more rows form solemn lines
like the bowed heads outside a soup kitchen.
"One day, you will run this farm," he says
as I spit winged grit from my teeth
and search my twenty-eight-year-old body
for the strength to spike one more.

2002

The Scar

Laura Collins

on my stomach
I called Fusia,
which cracked in the
corners when it
stretched to smile
over a balcony
or an open car door,
once made my belly
leak like a stapled
tomato. This
morning, in the
gray shadow behind
my closet door, I
found it white
biscuit dough,
drawn from
hip to hip,
pulled tight as a
fawn skin drum,
or an ear drum,
listening for signs
of life.

2003
Foreshadowing
Laura Phy

The smell of hydraulic fluid,
the lathe spitting shrapnel,
tiny bits of razor-sharp silver
on a blackened concrete floor,
a shower of fire bouncing off steel,
men in large black masks,
red tool boxes the size of refrigerators,
and my father,
hidden somewhere in the maze
of towering metal creations,
the only clean thing in sight.

He sees me in the middle,
pink bows, long hair, and bare feet,
and stops.
"Hi, Daddy. It's lunchtime."
He nods, puts a finger in the air,
and turns back to the man next to him,
who just crawled out from underneath
the steel beast beside me.
The cutting sounds,
the piercing high-pitched squeal
of blades on metal,
keep me from hearing them.

They each nod
and his large strides head my way.
He gets close and squats down next to me,
whispers loudly the thing he always says.
Watch my eyes.
Watch my feet.
Be careful—
this place was not built
for little girls.

2003
I used to write poetry
Jeff Crady

Just last year I wrote
of rotten apples . . .
how I slept sad and twisted
on my own tile floor.

This is what happens?
When the sadness is gone—
that space that once
seemed a cave, now
filling with the mineral forms
of contentment, stability . . .
of friends . . . Venus rising
each evening, its light
pokes through the
azure sky,
which ripples into rose,
deepens into merlot.

It has taken that long.
As slow as stalactites grow . . .
A few scarce centimeters
every year. Until there is
an arm that stretches
down, as if reaching
out for its brother's hand . . .
the finiteness of ground . . .
to stand, and not feel
legs give way.

2004

Stigmatism

Zacchaeus Compson

Some would say it was the perfect evening, like maybe it was. Campfires danced romantically, curves of flame melding with the warm velvet night. Fireflies blinked for one another, while crickets stroked the dark below. The pungent earth mixed with heavy smoke, each breath full and heady. In a nearby tent, two old lovers held each other again for the first time.

At our site the fire had died three times and so we rested in the blue light of our own full moon, its cobalt glow making the branches of trees seem naked and smooth. We sat at an old picnic table as she gave me a personality quiz, but my mind drifted. Down. Down my arm to where my skin barely touched hers. I worried she would find me there, in that point of warm heat so close to her. I pulled away, gazed into the trees.

She was opening now. Telling me things. Feelings. And I had shifted onto my back, floating with the stars, my head a breath from her thigh. One slight movement, one subtle lurch, and I could be resting in her lap. And she wouldn't care.

*****

The first time I saw it, I could not look away, like that first encounter with a deer. It wasn't a sty, exactly, but a growth, a subtle birthmark, a little nodule of flesh peeking out at me. Staring back. At first I thought it would go away, but it only got larger, and when I tried to look into her eyes I couldn't see them at all: just this protrusion, like a streetlight dimming the stars, swelling with each cricket chirp. I began to hate it, how it intruded in on our conversations. I would look only into her right eye, or stand on her good side. But it was still there, hiding discretely on the shore, just beyond the pool of her left eye. My hate for it burned like frost. If I touched it, would all this spiteful cold flow to my fingertip, concentrated at the point where it touched, freezing the nub like nitrogen? Would it break off and shatter into a million tiny crystals reflecting her new perfection? Melt away forever?

*****

The personality quiz was taking too long, and I was trapped in some theoretical point inside her sty. She always became frustrated that she couldn't figure me out, especially when I liked to finish her thoughts. But her eye was a mystery. Like, for her, the tiny outcropping wasn't there, like she had never known it. But how could she miss it? Didn't it hinder a perfect view? Didn't the mirror reflect a broken symmetry? Had she thought of surgery? Or would she be unchanged forever?

Deep inside the sty, I heard her voice, distant and muffled: *Zacchaeus, what's wrong? What's wrong?* And the voices of friends, alarmed at my inhumanity: *You can't judge her because of a tiny blemish. She cares about you. You two would be great together.* But it would never be two.

*****

At last, I could take no more: I walked away in silence as she pursued me, pleading and confused. She stopped, and I turned around to see her soft face in the moonlight. The crickets paused; her pain was like the chirp knotted in my throat. In the shadow of her smooth nose, the defect was hidden. I told her I had to leave, told her something might happen.

As I walked the mile down the abandoned highway to my seasonal apartment, everything was symbolic: the lone moon, the two yellow lines growing infinitely close but never touching, the lost call of a cricket. On the glowing crown of onyx highway I spun around in the light of the moon, a perfect, unblemished eye, watching me dance. Free.

2004
Sunspots
Marci Kacsir

There is something
About a sunspot
On a soft bed—
Cat envy perhaps,
Or that sunshine
Closes my eyes for me
And makes my skin
My own blanket.
I warm up to
The smell of baked pillows
On a cold comforter.
It reminds me
Of banana nut bread
At grandma's house.
But there is that something
About a sunspot
On a soft bed—
Where sleep curls
With its tail tucked
Under its chin.

2005
Canadian Sprawl
Travis Morris

He left her
for a Canadian pipedream
from there to Seattle
deeper than the Rubicon
Caesar admits
And when the opium
releases his fingers
they long to sift
blonde hair realities.

He left her
for a Canadian pipedream
the brothels
say does not exist,
"Go home to you
Kansas Girl, Blue Eyes,"
Marlena slurs with
discounted breath—
1st rate fucks were
guarantee though,
nothing else.
When you pay
for sex, you never regret
the money you saved.
"You can keep the
coupon if you behave,"
Sophia offers
at the Tabernacle Tushy
for his eagerness.

"They are not phenomenal
Maya, I'm sorry.

They are not my woman
Maya, I'm sorry.
I want a
cornhusker—
feed me bacon
before my eggs
so they taste better."

"Have fun, dress warm,"
she might call him Baby.
Canada's frontier
will cure like wine
and without a land bridge
to carry him back
to discovery,
he'll have
to fall in love.
His heart says Canada.

2005
Days on Raintree Farm (Before It Was Called That)
Tara Koger

Ray Fairchild
Returned from World War II
Blind

Back to his home, his wife
They would never try for children again
Sleeping in separate bedrooms

His wardrobe would become
Endless options of
Pinstriped pajamas
Meant for endless days
In a rocking chair

And his despair
If present
Would never utter a sigh
And I, as a child, would
Turn the tape deck over
After every click of Side A
And Side B

And his hair was gray
And perfected
As I parted and combed
Each morning

And we roamed
The perimeter of the property
Hand in hand, caneless,
So that no one would see
His lose his dignity

And though he hadn't seen it in years
He could quote the Bible verbatim
Every time my sinful mouth
ate dove breast

And, every so often, in bird nests,
I would find the clippings of his hair
Trimmed on the porch
Tediously with all of my care
Because visits to the hairdressers
Meant stares he could not see

And the wife, the aunt,
Would gladly pay
My small hand
A dollar a day
To make sure that I hugged
and kissed Uncle Ray
Goodbye.

Pseudo-daughter
As I was, he gave
Me a pony, a bedroom,
A swing
And in return
I would sing
His favorite hymn
After dinner
As he tapped a green
Glass cane.

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